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THE HONOR OF THE BIG SNOWS

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

The Honor of The Big Snows

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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THE HONOR OF THE BIG SNOWS

CHAPTER I

THE MUSIC

LISTEN, John—I hear music—"

The words came in a gentle whisper from the woman's lips. One white, thin hand lifted itself weakly to the rough face of the man who was kneeling beside her bed, and the great dark eyes from which he had hidden his own grew luminously bright for a moment, as she whispered again:

"John—I hear—music—"

A sigh fluttered from her lips. The man's head drooped until it rested very near to her bosom. He felt the quiver of her hand against his cheek, and in its touch there was something which told John Cummins that the end of all life had come for him

and for her. His heart beat fiercely, and his great shoulders shook with the agony that was eating at his soul.

"Yes, it is the pretty music, my Mélisse," he murmured softly, choking back his sobs. "It is the pretty music in the skies."

The hand pressed more tightly against his face.

"It's not the music in the skies, John. It is real —*real* music that I hear—"

"It's the sky music, my sweet Mélisse! Shall I open the door so that we can hear it better?"

The hand slipped from his cheek. Cummins lifted his head, slowly straightening his great shoulders as he looked down upon the white face, from which even the flush of fever was disappearing, as he had seen the pale glow of the northern sun fade before a thickening snow. He stretched his long, gaunt arms straight up to the low roof of the cabin, and for the first time in his life he prayed—prayed to the God who had made for him this world of snow and ice and endless forest very near to the dome of the earth, who had given him this woman, and who was now taking her from him.

When he looked again at the woman, her eyes were open, and there glowed in them still the feeble fire of a great love. Her lips, too, pleaded with him in their old, sweet way, which always meant that he was to kiss them, and stroke her hair, and tell her again that she was the most beautiful thing in the whole world.

"My Mélisse!"

He crushed his face to her, his sobbing breath smothering itself in the soft masses of her hair, while her arms rose weakly and fell around his neck. He heard the quick, gasping struggle for breath within her bosom, and, faintly again, the words:

"It—is—the—music—of—my—people!"

"It is the music of the angels in the skies, my sweet Mélisse! It is *our* music. I will open the door."

The arms had slipped from his shoulders. Gently he ran his rough fingers through the loose glory of the woman's hair, and stroked her face as softly as he might have caressed the cheek of a sleeping child.

"I will open the door, Mélisse."

His moccasined feet made no sound as he moved across the little room which was their home. At the door he paused and listened; then he opened it, and the floods of the white night poured in upon him as he stood with his eyes turned to where the cold, pale flashes of the aurora were playing over the pole. There came to him the hissing, saddening song of the northern lights—a song of vast, unending loneliness, which they two had come to know as the music of the skies.

Beyond that mystery-music there was no sound. To the eyes of John Cummins there was no visible movement of life. And yet he saw signs of it—signs which drew his breath from him in choking gulps, and which sent him out into the night, so that the woman might not hear.

It was an hour past midnight at the post, which had the Barren Lands at its back door. It was the hour of deep slumber for its people; but to-night there was no sleep for any of them. Lights burned dimly in the few rough log homes. The company's store was aglow, and the factor's office, a haven for

the men of the wilderness, shot one gleaming yellow eye out into the white gloom. The post was awake. It was waiting. It was listening. It was watching.

As the woman's door opened, wide and brimful of light, a door of one of the log houses opened, and then another, and out into the night, like dim shadows, trod the moccasined men from the factor's office, and stood there waiting for the word of life or death from John Cummins. In their own fashion these men, who, without knowing it, lived very near to the ways of God, sent mute prayers into the starry heavens that the most beautiful thing in the world might yet be spared to them.

It was just two summers before that this beautiful thing had come into Cummins' life, and into the life of the post. Cummins, red-headed, lithe as a cat, big-souled as the eternal mountain of the Crees, and the best of the company's hunters, had brought Mélisse thither as his bride. Seventeen rough hearts had welcomed her. They had assembled about that little cabin in which the light was shining now, speechless in their adoration of this woman who

had come among them, their caps in their hands, their faces shining, their eyes shifting before the glorious ones that looked at them and smiled at them as the woman shook their hands, one by one.

Perhaps she was not strictly beautiful, as most people judge; but she was beautiful here, four hundred miles beyond civilization. Mukee, the half-Cree, had never seen a white woman, for even the factor's wife was part Chippewayan; and no one of the others went down to the edge of the southern wilderness more than once each twelvemonth or so.

Mélisse's hair was brown and soft, and it shone with a sunny glory that reached far back into their conception of things dreamed of but never seen. Her eyes were as blue as the early wild flowers that came after the spring floods, and her voice was the sweetest sound that had ever fallen upon their ears. So these men thought when Cummins first brought home his wife, and the masterpiece which each had painted in his soul and brain was never changed. Each week and month added to the deep-toned value of that picture, as the passing of a century might add to a Raphael or a Vandyke.

The woman became more human, and less an angel, of course, but that only made her more real, and allowed them to become acquainted with her, to talk with her, and to love her more. There was no thought of wrong, for the devotion of these men was a great, passionless love unhinting of sin. Cummins and his wife accepted it, and added to it when they could, and were the happiest pair in all that vast Northland.

The girl—she was scarce more than budding into womanhood—fell happily into the ways of her new life. She did nothing that was elementally unusual, nothing more than any pure woman reared in the love of God and of a home would have done. In her spare hours she began to teach the half-dozen wild little children about the post, and every Sunday she told them wonderful stories out of the Bible. She ministered to the sick, for that was a part of her code of life. Everywhere she carried her glad smile, her cheery greeting, her wistful earnestness, to brighten what seemed to her the sad and lonely lives of these silent men of the North.

And she succeeded, not because she was unlike

other millions of her kind, but because of the difference between the fortieth degree and the sixtieth—the difference in the viewpoint of men who fought themselves into moral shreds in the big game of life and those who lived a thousand miles nearer to the dome of the earth.

A few days before there had come a wonderful event in the history of the company's post. A new life was born into the little cabin of Cummins and his wife. After this the silent, wordless worship of their people was filled with something very near to pathos. Cummins' wife was a mother! She was one of them now, an indissoluble part of their existence—a part of it as truly as the strange lights for ever hovering over the pole, as surely as the countless stars that never left the night skies, as surely as the endless forests and the deep snows!

Then had come the sudden change, and the gloom, that brought with it the shadow of death, fell like a pall upon the post, stifling its life, and bringing with it a grief that those who lived there had never known before.

There came to them no word from Cummins now.

He stood for a moment before his lighted door, and then went back, and the word passed softly from one to another that the most beautiful thing in the world was still living her sweet life in that little cabin at the end of the clearing.

"You hear the music in the skies—now, my Mélisse?" whispered the man, kneeling beside her again. "It is very pretty to-night!"

"It was not that," repeated the woman.

She attempted to stroke his face, but Cummins saw nothing of the effort, for the hand lay all but motionless. He saw nothing of the fading softness that glowed in the big, loving eyes, for his own eyes were blinded by a hot film. And the woman saw nothing of the hot film, so torture was saved them both. But suddenly the woman quivered, and Cummins heard a thrilling sound.

"It is the music!" she panted. "John, John, it is —the music—of—my—people!"

The man straightened himself, his face turned to the open door. He heard it now! Was it the blessed angels coming for his Mélisse? He rose, a sobbing note in his throat, and went, his arms

stretched out, to meet them. He had never heard a sound like that—never in all his life in this endless wilderness.

He went from the door out into the night, and, step by step, through the snow toward the black edge of the spruce forest. The sobs fell chokingly from his lips, and his arms were still reaching out to greet this messenger of the God of his beloved; for Cummins was a man of the wild and manner-less ways of a savage world, and he knew not what to make of this sweetness that came to them from out of the depths of the black forest.

"My Mélisse! My Mélisse!" he sobbed.

A figure came from the shadows, and with the figure came the music, sweet and soft and low. John Cummins stopped and turned his face straight up to the sky. His heart died within him.

The music ceased, and when he looked again the figure was close to him, staggering as it walked, and a face white and thin and starved came with it. It was a boy's face.

"For the museek of the *violon*—somet'ing to eat!" he heard, and the thin figure swayed and fell almost

into his arms. The voice came weak again. "Thees is Jan—Jan Thoreau—and his *violon*—"

The woman's bloodless face and her great staring dark eyes greeted them as they entered the cabin. As the man knelt beside her again, and lifted her head against his breast, she whispered once more:

"It is the—music—of my people—the violin!"

John Cummins turned his head.

"Play!" he breathed.

"Ah, the white angel is seek—ver' seek," murmured Jan, and he drew his bow gently across the strings of his violin.

From the instrument there came something so soft and sweet that John Cummins closed his eyes as he held the woman against his breast and listened. Not until he opened them again, and felt a strange chill against his cheek, did he know that his beloved's soul had gone from him on the gentle music of Jan Thoreau's violin.

CHAPTER II

MUKEE'S STORY

FOR many minutes after the last gentle breath had passed from the woman's lips, Jan Thoreau played softly upon his violin. It was the great, heart-broken sob of John Cummins that stopped him. As tenderly as if she had fallen into a sweet sleep from which he feared to awaken her, the man unclasped his arms and lowered his wife's head to the pillow; and with staring black eyes Jan crushed his violin against his ragged breast and watched him as he smoothed back the shimmering hair and looked long and hungrily into the still, white face.

Cummins turned to him, and, in the dim light of the cabin, their eyes met. It was then that Jan Thoreau knew what had happened. He forgot his starvation. He crushed his violin closer, and whispered to himself:

"The white angel ees—gone!"

Cummins rose from the bedside, slowly, like a man who had suddenly grown old. His moccasined feet dragged as he went to the door. They stumbled when he went out into the pale star-glow of the night.

Jan followed, swaying weakly, for the last of his strength had gone in the playing of the violin. Midway in the cabin he paused, and his eyes glowed with a wild, strange grief as he gazed down upon the still face of Cummins' wife, beautiful in death as it had been in life, and with the sweet softness of life still lingering there. Some time, ages and ages ago, he had known such a face, and had felt the great clutching love of it.

Something drew him to where John Cummins had knelt, and he fell upon his knees and gazed hungrily and longingly where John Cummins had gazed. His pulse was beating feebly, the weakness of seven days' starvation blurred his eyes, and unconsciously he sank over the bed and one of his thin hands touched the soft sweep of the woman's hair. A stifled cry fell from him as he jerked himself rig-

idly erect; and as if for the desecration of that touch there was but one way of forgiveness, he drew his violin half to his shoulder, and for a few moments played so softly that none but the spirit of the woman and himself could hear.

Cummins had partly closed the door after him; but watchers had seen the opening of it. A door opened here, and another there, and paths of yellow light flashed over the hard-trodden snow as shadowy life came forth to greet what message he brought from the little cabin.

Beyond those flashes of light there was no other movement, and no sound. Dark figures stood motionless. The lonely howl of a sledge-dog ended in a wail of pain as some one kicked it into terrified silence. The hollow cough of Mukee's father was smothered in the thick fur of his cap as he thrust his head from his little shack in the edge of the forest. A score of eyes watched Cummins as he came out into the snow, and the rough, loyal hearts of those who looked throbbed in fearful anticipation of the word he might be bringing to them.

Sometimes a nation ceases to breathe in the last

moments of its dying chief, and the black wings of calamity gather over its people, enshrouding them in a strange gloom and a stranger fear; and so, because the greatest of all tragedies had come into their little world, Cummins' people were speechless in their grief and their waiting for the final word. And when the word came to them at last, and passed from lip to lip, and from one grim, tense face to another, the doors closed again, and the lights went out one by one, until there remained only the yellow eye of the factor's office and the faint glow from the little cabin in which John Cummins knelt with his sobbing face crushed close to that of his dead.

There was no one who noticed Jan Thoreau when he came through the door of the factor's office. His coat of caribou-skin was in tatters. His feet thrust themselves from the toes of his moccasins. His face was so thin and white that it shone with the pallor of death from its frame of straight dark hair. His eyes gleamed like black diamonds. The madness of hunger was in him.

An hour before, death had been gripping at his throat, when he stumbled upon the lights of the post.

That night he would have died in the deep snows. Wrapped in its thick coat of bearskin he clutched his violin to his breast, and sank down in a ragged heap beside the hot stove. His eyes traveled about him in fierce demand. There is no beggary among these strong-souled men of the far North, and Jan's lips did not beg. He unwrapped the bearskin, and whispered:

"For the museek of the *violon*—somet'ing to eat!"

He played, even as the words fell from him, but only for a moment—for the bow slipped from his nerveless grip and his head sank forward upon his breast.

In the half-Cree's eyes there was something of the wild beauty that gleamed in Jan's. For an instant those eyes had met in the savage recognition of blood; and when Jan's head fell weakly, and his violin slipped to the floor, Mukee lifted him in his strong arms and carried him to the shack in the edge of the spruce and balsam.

And there was no one who noticed Jan the next day—except Mukee. He was fed. His frozen blood grew warm. As life returned, he felt more and more

the pall of gloom that had settled over this spark of life in the heart of the wilderness. He had seen the woman, in life and in death, and he, too, loved her and grieved that she was no more. He said nothing; he asked nothing; but he saw the spirit of adoration in the sad, tense faces of the men. He saw it in the terror-stricken eyes of the wild little children who had grown to worship Cummins' wife. He read it in the slinking stillness of the dogs, in the terrible, pulseless quiet that had settled about him.

It was not hard for Jan to understand, for he, too, worshiped the memory of a white, sweet face like the one that he had seen in the cabin. He knew that this worship at Lac Bain was a pure worship, for the honor of the big snows was a part of his soul. It was his religion, and the religion of these others who lived four hundred miles or more from a southern settlement.

It meant what civilization could not understand—freezing and slow starvation rather than theft, and respect for the tenth commandment above all other things. It meant that up here, under the cold chill of the northern skies, things were as God meant

them to be, and that a few of His creatures could live in a love that was neither possession nor sin.

A year after Cummins brought his wife into the North, a man came to the post from Fort Churchill, on Hudson's Bay. He was an Englishman, belonging to the home office of the Hudson's Bay Company in London. He brought with him something new, as the woman had brought something new; only in this instance it was an element of life which Cummins' people could not understand.

It breathed of tragedy from the first, to the men of the post. To the Englishman, on the other hand, it promised to be but an incident—a passing adventure in pleasure. Here again was that difference of viewpoint—the eternity of difference between the middle and the end of the earth.

Cummins was away for a month on a trap-line that went into the Barren Lands. At these times the woman fell as a heritage to those who remained, and they watched over her as a parent might guard its child. Yet the keenest eyes would not have perceived that this was so.

With Cummins gone, the tragedy progressed

swiftly toward finality. The Englishman came from among women. For months he had been in a torment of desolation. Cummins' wife was to him like a flower suddenly come to relieve the tantalizing barrenness of a desert; and with the wiles and ways of civilization he sought to breathe its fragrance.

In the days and weeks that followed, he talked a great deal, when heated by the warmth of the box stove and by his own thoughts; and this was because he had not yet measured the hearts of Cummins' people. And because the woman knew nothing of what was said about the box stove, she continued in the even course of her pure life, neither resisting nor encouraging the new-comer, yet ever tempting him with that sweetness which she gave to all alike.

As yet there was no suspicion in her soul. She accepted the Englishman's friendship, for he was a stranger among her people. She did not hear the false note, she saw no step that promised evil. Only the men at the post heard, and saw, and understood.

Like so many faithful beasts, they were ready to spring, to rend flesh, to tear life out of him who

threatened the desecration of all that was good and pure and beautiful to them; and yet, dumb in their devotion and faith, they waited and watched for a sign from the woman. The blue eyes of Cummins' wife, the words of her gentle lips, the touch of her hands, had made law at the post. If she smiled upon the stranger and talked with him, and was pleased with him, that was only one other law that she had made for them to respect. So they were quiet, evaded the Englishman as much as possible, and watched—always watched.

One day something happened. Cummins' wife came into the company's store; and a quick flush shot into her cheeks, and the glitter of blue diamonds into her eyes, when she saw the stranger standing there. The man's red face grew redder, and he shifted his gaze. When Cummins' wife passed him, she drew her skirt close to her; and there was the poise of a queen in her head, the glory of wife and womanhood, the living, breathing essence of all that was beautiful in her people's honor of the big snows.

That night Mukee, the half-Cree, slunk around

in the edge of the forest to see that all was well in Cummins' little home. Once Mukee had suffered a lynx-bite that went clear to the bone, and the woman had saved his hand. After that, the savage in him was enslaved to her like an invisible spirit.

He crouched for a few minutes in the snow, looking at the pale filter of light that came through a hole in the curtain of the woman's window; and as he looked something came between him and the light. Against the cabin he saw the shadow of a sneaking human form; and as silently as the steely flash of the aurora over his head, as swiftly as a lean deer, he sped through the gloom of the forest's edge and came up behind the woman's home.

With the caution of a lynx, his head close to the snow, he peered around the logs. It was the Englishman who stood looking through the tear in that curtained window.

Mukee's moccasined feet made no sound. His hand fell as gently as a child's upon the stranger's arm.

"Thees is not the honor of the beeg snows," he whispered. "Come!"

A sickly pallor filled the other man's face; but Mukee's voice was soft and dispassionate, his touch was velvety in its hint, and he went with the guiding hand away from the curtained window, smiling in a companionable way. Mukee's teeth gleamed back. The Englishman chuckled.

Then Mukee's hands changed. They flew to the thick, reddening throat of the man from civilization, and without a sound the two sank together upon the snow.

The next day a messenger behind six dogs set out for Fort Churchill, with word for the company's home office that the Englishman had died in the big snow—which was true.

Mukee told this to Jan, for there was the bond of blood between them. It was a painting of life, and love, and purity. Deep down in the loneliness of his heart, Jan Thoreau, in his own simple way, thanked the great God that it had been given to him to play his violin as the woman died.

CHAPTER III

LITTLE MELISSE

THE passing of Cummins' wife was as quiet as had been her coming. With bare heads, their shaggy hair falling wildly about their faces, their lips set tight to choke back their grief, the few at the post went, one by one, into the little cabin, and gazed for the last time upon her face. There was but one sound other than the gentle tread of their moccasined feet, and that was a catching, sobbing moan that fell from the thick gray beard of Williams, the old factor.

After that they carried her to where a clearing had been cut in the edge of the forest; and at the foot of a giant spruce, towering sentinel-like to the sky, they lowered her into the frozen earth. Gaspingly, Williams stumbled over the words on a ragged page that had been torn from a Bible. The rough

men who stood about him bowed their wild heads upon their breasts, and sobs broke from them.

At last Williams stopped his reading, stretched his long arms above his head, and cried chokingly:

"The great God keep Mees Cummins!"

As the earth fell, there came from the edge of the forest the low, sweet music of Jan Thoreau's violin. No man in all the world could have told what he played, for it was the music of Jan's soul, wild and whispering of the winds, sweetened by some strange inheritance that had come to him with the picture which he carried in his throbbing heart.

He played until only the tall spruce and John Cummins stood over the lone grave. When he stopped, the man turned to him, and they went together to the little cabin where the woman had lived.

There was something new in the cabin now—a tiny, white, breathing thing over which an Indian woman watched. The boy stood beside John Cummins, looking down upon it, and trembling.

"Ah," he whispered, his great eyes glowing. "It ees the *leetle* white angel!"

"It is the little Mélisse," replied the man.

He dropped upon his knees, with his sad face close to the new life that was to take the place of the one that had just gone out. Jan felt something tugging in a strange way at his heart, and he, too, fell upon his knees beside John Cummins in this first worship of the child.

From this hour of their first kneeling before the little life in the cabin, something sprang up between Jan Thoreau and John Cummins which it would have been hard for man to break. Looking up after many moments' contemplation of the little Mélisse, Jan gazed straight into Cummins' face, and whispered softly the word which in Cree means "father." This was Jan's first word for Mélisse.

When he looked back, the baby was wriggling and kicking as he had seen tiny wolf-whelps wriggle and kick before their eyes were open. His beautiful eyes laughed. As cautiously as if he were playing with hot iron, he reached out a thin hand, and when one of his fingers suddenly fell upon something very soft and warm, he jerked it back as quickly as if he had been burned.

That night, when Jan picked up his violin to go

back to Mukee's cabin, Cummins put his two big hands on the boy's shoulders and said:

"Jan, who are you, and where did you come from?"

Jan stretched his arm vaguely to the north.

"Jan Thoreau," he replied simply. "Thees is my *violon*. We come alone through the beeg snow."

Cummins stared as if he saw a wonderful picture in the boy's eyes. He dropped his hands, and walked to the door. When they stood alone outside, he pointed up to the stars, and to the mist-like veil of silver light that the awakening aurora was spreading over the northern skies.

"Get your bearings, and tell me again where you came from, Jan!"

Unhesitatingly the boy pointed into the north.

"We starve seven day in the beeg snow. My *violon* keep the wolf off at night."

"Look again, Jan! Didn't you come from there, or there, or there?"

Cummins turned slowly, facing first to the east and Hudson's Bay, then to the south, and lastly to the west. There was something more than curiosity in

the tense face that came back in staring inquiry to Jan Thoreau.

The boy hunched his shoulders, and his eyes flashed.

"It ees not lie that Jan Thoreau and hees *violon* come through the beeg snow," he replied softly. "It ees not lie!"

There was more than gentleness in John Cummins' touch now. Jan could not understand it, but he yielded to it, and went back into the cabin. There was more than friendship in Cummins' eyes when he placed his hands again upon the boy's shoulders, and Jan could not understand that.

"There is plenty of room here—now," said Cummins huskily. "Will you stay with the little Mélisse and me?"

"With the leetle Mélisse!" gasped the boy. Softly he sped to the tiny cot and knelt beside it, his thin shoulders hunched over, his long black hair shining lustrously in the lamp-glow, his breath coming in quick, sobbing happiness. "I—I—stay with the leetle white angel for ever and ever!" he whispered, his words meant only for the unhearing ears of the

child. "Jan Thoreau will stay, yes—and hees *violon!* I give it to you—and ze museek!"

He laid his precious violin across the foot of the cot.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROBLEM

IN the days that followed, there came other things which Jan could not understand, and which he made no great effort to understand. He talked little, even to Cummins. He listened, and his eyes would answer, or he would reply with strange, eery little hunches of his shoulders, which ruffled up his hair. To the few simple souls at the post, he brought with him more than his starved body from out of the unknown wilderness. This was the chief cause of those things which he could not understand.

No man learned more of him than had Cummins. Even to Mukee, his history was equally simple and short. Always he said that he came from out of the north—which meant the Barren Lands; and the Barren Lands meant death. No man had ever come across them as Jan had come; and at another time,

and under other circumstances, Cummins and his people would have believed him mad.

But others had listened to that strange, sweet music that came to them from out of the forest on the night when the woman died, and they, like Cummins, had been stirred by thrilling thoughts. They knew little of God, as God is preached; but they knew a great deal about Him in other ways. They knew that Jan Thoreau had come like a messenger from the angels, that the woman's soul had gone out to meet him, and that she had died sweetly on John Cummins' breast while he played. So the boy, with his thin, sensitive face and his great, beautiful eyes, became a part of what the woman had left behind for them to love. As a part of her they accepted him, without further questioning as to who he was or whence he came.

In a way, he made up for her loss. The woman had brought something new and sweet into their barren lives, and he brought something new and sweet—the music of his violin. He played for them in the evening, in the factor's office; and at these times they knew that Cummins' wife was very near

to them and that she was speaking to them through the things which Jan Thoreau played.

Music had long passed out of their lives. Into some, indeed, it had never come. Years ago, Williams had been at a post where there was an accordion. Cummins had heard music when he went down to civilization for his wife, more than two years ago. To the others it was mystery which stirred them to the depths of their souls, and which revealed to them many things that had long been hidden in the dust of the past.

These were hours of triumph for Jan in the factor's office. Perched on a box, with his back to the wall, his head thrown back, his black eyes shining, his long hair giving to his face a half savage beauty, he was more than king to the grim-visaged men about him. They listened, movelessly, soundlessly; and when he stopped there was still neither move nor sound until he had wrapped his violin in its bearskin and had returned to John Cummins and the little Mélisse. Jan understood the silence, and took it for what it meant.

But it was the audience in the little cabin that Jan

liked best, and, most of all, he loved to have the little Mélisse alone. As the days of early spring trapping approached, and the wilderness for a hundred miles around the post was crisscrossed with the trails of the Cree and Chippewayan fur-seekers, Cummins was absent for days at a time, strengthening the company's friendships, and bargaining for the catch that would be coming to market about eight weeks later.

This was a year of intense rivalry, for the Révillons, French competitors of the company, had established a post two hundred miles to the west, and rumor spread that they were to give sixty pounds of flour to the company's forty, and four feet of cloth to the yard. This meant action among Williams and his people, and the factor himself plunged into the wilderness. Mukee, the half-Cree, went among his scattered tribesmen along the edge of the barrens, stirring them by the eloquence of new promises and by fierce condemnation of the interlopers to the west. Old Per-ee, with a strain of Eskimo in him, went boldly behind his dogs to meet the little black people from farther north, who came

down after foxes and half-starved polar bears that had been carried beyond their own world on the ice-floes of the preceding spring. Young Williams, the factor's son, followed after Cummins, and the rest of the company's men went into the south and east.

The exodus left desolate lifelessness at the post. The windows of the fireless cabins were thick with clinging frost. There was no movement in the factor's office. The dogs were gone, and wolves and lynx sniffed closer each night. In the oppression of this desertion, the few Indian and half-breed children kept indoors, and Williams' Chippewayan wife, fat and lazy, left the company's store securely locked.

In this silence and lifelessness Jan Thoreau felt a new and ever-increasing happiness. To him the sound of life was a thing vibrant with harshness; quiet—the dead, pulseless quiet of lifelessness—was beautiful. He dreamed in it, and it was then that his fingers discovered new things in his violin.

He often sent Maballa, the Indian woman who cared for Mélisse, to gossip with Williams' wife, so that he was alone a great deal with the baby. At

these times, when the door was safely barred against the outside world, it was a different Jan Thoreau who crouched upon his knees beside the cot. His face was aflame with a great, absorbing passion which at other times he concealed. His beautiful eyes glowed with hidden fires, and he whispered soothing, singsong things to the child, and played softly upon his violin, leaning his black head far down so that the baby Mélisse could clutch her appreciative fingers in his hair.

"Ah, ze sweet leetle white angel!" he would cry, as she tugged and kicked. "I luf you so—I luf you, an' will stay always, an' play ze *violon!* Ah, *mon Dieu*, you will be ze gr-r-r-eat bea-utiful white angel lak—*her!*"

He would laugh and coo like a mother, and talk, for at these times Jan Thoreau's tongue was as voluble as his violin.

Sometimes Mélisse listened as if she understood the wonderful things he was telling her. She would lie upon her back with her eyes fixed upon him, her little red fists doubled over his bow, or a thumb thrust into her mouth. And the longer she lay like

this, gazing at him blankly, the more convinced Jan became that she was understanding him; and his voice grew soft and low, and his eyes shone with a soft mist as he told her those things which John Cummins would have given much to know.

"Some day you shall understand why it happened, sweet Mélisse," he whispered, bringing his eyes so near that she reached up an inquiring finger to them. "Then you will luf Jan Thoreau!"

There were other times when Jan did not talk, but when the baby Mélisse talked to him; and these were moments of even greater joy. With the baby wriggling and kicking, and making queer noises in her tiny cot, he would sit silently upon his heels, watching her with the pride and happiness of a mother lynx in the first tumbling frolics of her kittens.

Once, when Mélisse straightened herself for an instant, and half reached up her tiny arms to him, laughing and cooing into his face, he gave a glad cry, crushed his face down to hers, and did what he had not dared to do before—kissed her. There was something about it that frightened the little Mélisse, and she set up a wailing that sent Jan, in a panic of

dismay, for Maballa. It was a long time before he ventured to kiss her again.

It was during this fortnight of desolation at the post that Jan discovered the big problem for himself and John Cummins. In the last days of the second week, he spent much of his time skirting the edge of the barrens in search of caribou, that there might be meat in plenty when the dogs and men returned a little later. One afternoon, he returned early, while the pale sun was still in the sky, laden with the meat of a musk-ox. As he came from the edge of the forest, his slender body doubled over under the weight of his pack, a terrifying sight greeted him in the little clearing at the post.

Upon her knees in front of their cabin was Maballa, industriously rolling the half-naked little Mélisse about in a soft pile of snow, and doing her work, as she firmly believed, in a most faithful and thorough manner. With a shriek, Jan threw off his pack and darted toward her like a wild thing.

"*Sacré bleu*—you keel—keel ze leetle Mélisse!" he cried shrilly, snatching up the half-frozen child. "*Mon Dieu,* she ees not papoose! She ees ceevilize—

ceevilize!" and he ran swiftly with her into the cabin, flinging back a torrent of Cree anathema at the dumbly bewildered Maballa.

Jan left the rest of his musk-ox to the wolves and foxes. He went out into the snow, and found half a dozen other snow-wallows in which the helpless Mélisse had taken her chilling baths. He watched Maballa with a new growing terror, and fifty times a day he said to her:

"Mélisse ees not papoose! She ees ceevilize—lak *her!*" And he would point to the lonely grave under the guardian spruce.

At last Maballa went into an ecstasy of understanding. Mélisse was not to be taken out and rolled in the snow; so she brought in the snow and rolled it over Mélisse!

When Jan discovered this, his tongue twisted itself into sounds so terrible, and his face writhed so fiercely, that Maballa began to comprehend that thereafter no snow at all, either out doors or in, was to be used in the physical development of the little Mélisse.

This was the beginning of the problem, and it

grew and burst forth in all its significance on the day before Cummins came in from the wilderness.

For a week Maballa had been dropping sly hints of a wonderful thing which she and the factor's half-breed wife were making for the baby. Jan had visions of a gorgeous garment covered with beads and gaudy braid, which would give the little Mélisse unending delight. On the day before Cummins' arrival, Jan came in from chopping wood, and went to the cot. It was empty. Maballa was gone. A sudden fear thrilled him to the marrow, and he sprang back to the cabin door, ready to shriek out the Indian woman's name.

A sound stopped him—the softest, sweetest sound in all the world to Jan Thoreau—and he whirled around like a cat. Mélisse was smiling and making queer, friendly little signals to him from the table. She was standing upright, wedged in a coffin-shaped thing from which only her tiny white face peered out at him; and Jan knew that this was Maballa's surprise. Mélisse was in a papoose-sling!

"Mélisse, I say you shall be no papoose!" he cried, running to the table. "You ees ceevilize! You shall

be no papoose—not if twen' t'ous'nd devil come tak Jan Thoreau!"

And he snatched her from her prison, flung Maballa's handiwork out into the snow, and waited impatiently for the return of John Cummins.

CHAPTER V

LOVE PATCHES

CUMMINS returned the next day—not that his work among the wild trappers to the south was finished, but because he had suffered a hurt in falling from a slippery ledge. When Jan, from his wood-chopping in the edge of the forest, saw the team race up to the little cabin and a strange Cree half carry the wounded man through the door, he sped swiftly across the open with visions of new misfortune before him.

What he saw when he reached the door was reassuring. Cummins was upon his knees beside the cot, his big shoulders hunched over, and Mélisse was welcoming him with her whole vocabulary of sound. The injury to Cummins' leg was not serious; and not being serious, it was accepted as a special incident of Providence by Jan, for the new thoughts that

had come into his head were causing him great uneasiness.

He lost no time in revealing his fears, after Maballa had been sent to the factor's wife. With graphic gesture he told of what had happened. Cummins hobbled to the door to look upon the wallows in the snow, and hobbled back to the table when Jan ran there in excited imitation of the way in which he had found the little Mélisse in Maballa's sling.

"She ees ceevilize!" finished Jan hotly. "She ees not papoose! She mus' be lak—*her!*" His great eyes shone, and Cummins felt a thickening in his throat as he looked into them and saw what the boy meant. "Maballa mak papoose out of Mélisse. She grow—know not'ing, lak papoose, talk lak papoose—"

Jan's feelings overwhelmed his tongue. His shining hair rumpled thickly about his face as he leaned anxiously toward Cummins; and Cummins, in turn, stared down in dumb perplexity upon the joyful kickings and wrigglings of the growing problem.

"Ees she not ceevilize?" demanded Jan ecstatically, bending his black head over her. "Ah, ze sweet Mélisse!"

"Yes, she must be like *her,* Jan—just as good and just as sweet and just as beautiful," interrupted Cummins gently.

There was a quick intaking of his breath as he hobbled back to his own cot, leaving Jan at play with the baby.

That night, in the dim, sputtering glow of an oil-lamp, John Cummins and Jan Thoreau solemnly set to work to thrash out the great problem that had suddenly entered into their existence. To these two there was no element of humor in what they were doing, for into their keeping had been given a thing for which God had not schemed them. The woman, had she been there, would have laughed at them, and in a dozen gentle breaths might have told them all that the world held in secret between mother and child; but, leaving them, she had passed on to them something that was life, like herself, and yet mystery.

Had fate given Maballa to Mélisse for a mother there would have been no mystery. She would have developed as naturally as a wolf-whelp or a lynx-kitten, a savage breath of life in a savage world,

waxing fat in snow-baths, arrow-straight in papoose-slings, a moving, natural thing in a desolation to which generations and centuries of forebears had given it birthright. But Mélisse was like her mother. In the dreams of the two who were planning out her fate, she was to be a reincarnation of her mother. That dream left a ray of comfort in Cummins' breast when his wife died. It stirred happy visions within Jan. And it ended with a serious shock when Maballa brought into their mental perspective of things the possibilities of environment.

So far as Cummins knew, there was not a white woman nearer than Fort Churchill, two hundred miles away. In all that region he knew of only two full-white men, and they were Williams and himself. The baby Mélisse was hopelessly lost in a world of savagery; honest, loyal, big-souled savagery—but savagery for all that, and the thought of it brought the shadows of fear and foreboding to the two into whose lives the problem had just come.

Long into the night they talked seriously of the matter, while Mélisse slept; and the longer they talked, the greater loomed the problem before them.

Cummins fancied that he already began to see signs of the transformation in Mélisse. She was passionately fond of the gaudy things Maballa gave her, which was a sign of savagery. She was charmed by confinement in the papoose-sling, which was another sign of it; and she had not died in the snow-wallows —which was still another.

So far back as he could remember, Cummins had never come into finger-touch of a white baby. Jan was as blissfully ignorant; so they determined upon immediate and strenuous action. Maballa would be ceaselessly watched and checked at every turn. The Indian children would not be allowed to come near Mélisse. They two—John Cummins and Jan Thoreau—would make her like the woman who slept under the sentinel spruce.

"She ees ceevilize," said Jan with finality, "an' we mus' keep her ceevilize!"

Cummins counted back gravely upon his fingers. The little Mélisse was four months and eighteen days old!

"To-morrow we will make her one of those things with wheels—like the baby-wagons they have in the

South," he said. "She must not go in the papoose-slings!"

"An' I will teach her ze museek," whispered Jan, his eyes glowing. "That ees ceevilize!"

Suddenly an eager light came into Cummins' face, and he pointed to a calico-covered box standing upon end in a corner of the room.

"There are the books—*her* books, Jan," he said softly, the trembling thrill of inspiration in his voice. He limped across the room, dropped upon his knees before the box, and drew back the curtain. Jan knelt beside him. "They were *her* books," he repeated. There was a sobbing catch in his throat, and his head fell a little upon his breast. "Now—we will give them—to Mélisse."

He drew the books out, one by one, his fingers trembling and his breath coming quickly as he touched them—a dozen worn, dusty things, holding within them more than John Cummins would ever know of the woman he had lost. These volumes of dead voices had come with her into the wilderness from that other world she had known. They breathed the pathos of her love from out of their

ragged pages, mended in a hundred places to keep them from falling into utter ruin. Slowly the man gathered them against his breast, and held them there silently, as he might have held the woman, fighting hard to keep back his grief.

Jan thrust a hand deeper into the box, and brought forth something else—a few magazines and papers, as ragged and worn as the books. In these other treasures there were pictures—pictures of the things in civilization, which Jan had never seen, and which were too wonderful for him to comprehend at first. His eyes burned excitedly as he held up a gaudily covered fashion paper to John Cummins.

"Theese are picture for Mélisse!" he whispered tensely. "We teach her—we show her—we mak her know about ceevilize people!"

Cummins replaced the books, one at a time, and each he held tenderly for a moment, wiping and blowing away the dust gathered upon it. At the last one of all, which was more ragged and worn than the others, he gazed for a long time. It was a little Bible, his wife's Bible, finger-worn, patched, pathetic in its poverty. The man gulped hard.

"She loved this, Jan," he said huskily. "She loved this worn, old book more than anything else, and little Mélisse must love it also. Mélisse must be a Christian."

"Ah, yes, ze leetle Mélisse mus' love ze great God!" said Jan softly.

Cummins rose to his feet and stood for a moment looking at the sleeping baby.

"A missionary is coming over from Fort Churchill to talk to our trappers when they come in. She shall be baptized!"

Like a cat Jan was on his feet, his eyes flashing, his long, thin fingers clenched, his body quivering with a terrible excitement.

"No—no—not baptize by missioner!" he cried. "She shall be good, an' love ze great God, but not baptize by missioner! No—no—no!"

Cummins turned upon him in astonishment. Before him Jan Thoreau stood for a minute like one gone mad, his whole being consumed in a passion terrible to look upon. Lithe giant of muscle and fearlessness that he was, Cummins involuntarily drew back a step, and the mainspring of instinct

within him prompted him to lift a hand, as if to ward off a leaping thing from his breast.

Jan noted the backward step, the guarded uplift of hand, and with an agonized cry he buried his face in his hands. In another instant he had turned, and, before Cummins' startled voice found words, had opened the door and run out into the night. The man saw him darting swiftly toward the forest, and called to him, but there was no response.

There was a hot fire burning in Jan's brain, a blazing, writhing contortion of things that brought a low moaning from his lips. He ran tirelessly and swiftly until he sank down upon the snow in a silent place far from where he had left John Cummins. His eyes still blazed with their strange fire upon the desolation about him, his fingers clenched and unclenched themselves, digging their nails into his flesh, and he spoke softly to himself, over and over again, the name of the little Mélisse.

Painting itself each instant more plainly through the tumult of his emotions was what Jan had come to know as the picture in his brain. Shadowy and indistinct at first, in pale, elusive lines of mental

fabric, he saw the picture growing; and in its growth he saw first the soft, sweet outlines of a woman's face, and then great luring eyes, dark like his own—and before these eyes, which gazed upon him with overwhelming love, all else faded away from before Jan Thoreau. The fire went out of his eyes, his fingers relaxed, and after a little while he got up out of the snow, shivering, and went back to the cabin.

Cummins asked no questions. He looked at Jan from his cot, and watched the boy silently as he undressed and went to bed; and in the morning the whole incident passed from his mind. The intangible holds but little fascination for the simple folk who live under the Arctic Circle. Their struggle is with life, their joys are in its achievement, in their constant struggle to keep life running strong and red within them. Such an existence of solitude and of strife with nature leaves small room for curiosity. So the nature of John Cummins led him to forget what had happened, as he would have forgotten the senseless running away of a sledge-dog, and its subsequent return. He saw no tragedy, and no promise of tragedy, in the thing that had occurred.

There was no recurrence of the strange excitement in Jan. He gave no hint of it in word or action, and the thing seemed to be forgotten between the two.

The education of the little Mélisse began at once, while the post was still deserted. It began, first of all, with Maballa. She stared dumbly and with shattered faith at these two creatures who told her of wonderful things in the upbringing of a child—things of which she had never so much as heard rumor before. Her mother instincts were aroused, but with Cree stoicism she made no betrayal of them.

The leather-tanned immobility of her face underwent no whit of change when Cummins solemnly declared that the little Mélisse was about to begin teething. She sat grimly and watched them in silence when between them, upon a bearskin stretched on the floor, they tried vainly to persuade Mélisse to use her feet.

It was great fun for Mélisse, and she enjoyed it immensely; so that as the days passed, and the post still remained deserted, John Cummins and Jan Thoreau spent much of their time upon their knees. In their eyes, the child's progress was remarkable.

They saw in her an unceasing physical growth, and countless symptoms of forthcoming mental development. She delighted to pull the strings of Jan's violin, which was an unmistakable token of her musical genius. She went into ecstasies over the gaudy plates in the fashion paper. She fingered them in suggestive and inquiring silence, or with still more suggestive grunts, and made futile efforts to eat them, which was the greatest token of all.

Weeks passed, and Williams came in from the southern forests. Mukee followed him from the edge of the barrens. Per-ee returned from the Eskimo people, three-quarters starved and with half of his dogs stolen. From the north, east, west, and south the post's fur-rangers trailed back. Life was resumed. There was a softness in the air, a growing warmth in the midday sun. The days of the big change were near. And when they came, John Cummins and Jan Thoreau, of all the factor's people, wore patches at their knees.

CHAPTER VI

DAYS OF TRIUMPH

ONE afternoon, in the beginning of the mush-snow, a long team of rakish Malemutes, driven by an Athabasca French-Canadian, raced wildly into the clearing about the post. A series of yells, and the wild cracking of a thirty-foot caribou-gut whip, announced that the big change was at hand —that the wilderness was awakening, and life was drawing near.

The entire post rushed out to meet the new-comer —men and dogs, the little black-and-tan children, and even Williams' fat and lethargic wife. For a few moments there was a scene of wild disorder, of fighting Malemutes buried under a rush of angry huskies, while men shouted, and the yelling Frenchman leaped about and cut his caribou-gut in vicious slashes over the wolfish horde around his heavily laden sledge.

Partial order being restored, Mukee and Per-ee took charge of the snarling Malemutes, and, surrounded by Williams' men, the trapper stalked to the company's office. He was Jean de Gravois, the most important man in the Fond du Lac country, for whose good-will the company paid a small bonus. That he had made a record catch even the children knew by the size of the packs on his sledge and by the swagger in his walk.

Gravois was usually one of the last to appear at the annual gathering of the wilderness fur-gatherers. He was a big man in reputation, as he was small in stature. He was known as far west as the Peace River, and eastward to Fort Churchill. He loved to make his appearance at the post in a wild and picturesque rush when the rest of the forest rovers were there to look on, and to envy or admire. He was one of the few of his kind who had developed personal vanity along with unerring cunning in the ways of the wild. Everybody liked Gravois, for he had a big soul in him and was as fearless as a lynx; and he liked everybody, including himself.

He explained his early arrival by announcing in

a nonchalant manner that after he had given his Malemutes a day's rest he was going on to Fort Churchill, to bring back a wife. He hinted, with a punctuating crack of his whip, that he would make a second visit, and a more interesting one, at just about the time when the trappers were there in force.

Jan Thoreau listened to him, hunching his shoulders a little at the other's manifest air of importance. In turn, the French-Canadian scrutinized Jan good-naturedly. Neither of them knew the part which Jean de Gravois was to play in Jan's life.

Every hour after the half-breed's arrival quickened the pulse of expectancy at the post. For six months it had been a small and solitary unit of life in the heart of a big desolation. The first snow had smothered it in a loneliness that was almost the loneliness of desertion. With that first snow began the harvest days of the people of the wilderness. Far and wide they were busy along their trap-lines, their lonely shacks hidden in the shelter of thick swamps, in deep chasms and dense forests. For six months the short days and the long nights had been days and nights of fur-gathering.

During those months the post was silent. It lived and breathed, but that was all. Its life, for Williams and the few people whom the company kept with him, was a life of waiting. Now the change was at hand. It was like the breath of spring to the awakening wilderness. The forest people were moving. Trap-lines were being broken, shacks abandoned, sledge-dogs put to harness. On the day that Jean de Gravois left for Hudson's Bay, the company's supplies came in from Fort Churchill—seven toboggans drawn by Eskimo dogs, laden with flour and cloth; fifty pounds of beads, ammunition, and a hundred other things to be exchanged for the furs that would soon be in London and Paris.

Fearfully Jan Thoreau ran out to meet the sledges. There were seven Indians and one white man. Jan thrust himself close to look at the white man. He wore two revolver-holsters and carried an automatic. Unquestionably he was not a missionary, but an agent of the company well prepared to care for the company's treasure.

Jan hurried back to the cabin, his heart bubbling with a strange joy.

"There ees no missioner, Mélisse!" he cried triumphantly, dropping beside her, his face glowing with the gladness of his tidings. "You shall be good and beautiful, lak *her,* but you shall not be baptize by missioner! He has not come!"

A few minutes later Cummins came in. One of his hands was torn and bleeding.

"Those Eskimo dogs are demons!" he growled. "If they knew how to stand on their legs, they'd eat our huskies alive! Will you help me with this?"

Jan was at work in an instant, bandaging the wounded hand.

"It ees not deep," he said; and then, without looking up, he added: "The missioner did not come."

"No," said Cummins shortly. "Neither has the mail. He is with that."

He did not notice the sudden tremble of Jan's fingers, nor did he see the startled look that shot into the boy's down-turned eyes. Jan finished his bandaging without betraying his emotion, and went back with Cummins to the company's store.

The next morning, two Chippewayans trailed in with a team of mongrel curs from the south. There-

after Cummins found but little time to devote to Mélisse. The snow was softening rapidly, and the daily increasing warmth of the sun hastened the movement of the trappers. Mukee's people from the western Barren Lands arrived first, bringing with them great loads of musk-ox and caribou skins, and an army of big-footed, long-legged Mackenzie hounds that pulled like horses and wailed like whipped puppies when the huskies and Eskimo dogs set upon them.

From east and west and south all trails now led to the post. By the end of the third day after the arrival of the company's supplies, a babel of fighting, yelling, ceaselessly moving discord had driven forth the peace and quiet in which Cummins' wife had died. The fighting and discord were among the dogs, and the yelling was a necessary human accompaniment. Half a hundred packs, almost as wild and as savage as the wolves from whom half of them possessed a strong inheritance of blood, were thrown suddenly into warring confusion.

All the dogs were fighters except the big, soft-throated Mackenzie hounds, with the slow strength

of oxen in their movements, and the quarter-strained and half-strained mongrels from the south; and upon these unfortunates the others preyed. Packs of fierce Labrador dogs, never vanquished except by death, came from close to Hudson's Bay. Team after team of the little yellow and gray Eskimo dogs, as quick with their fangs as were their black and swift-running masters with their hands and feet, met the much larger and darker-colored Malemutes from the Athabasca. Enemies of all these, fighting, snapping, and snarling, with the lust of killing deep born in them from their wolf progenitors, packs of fierce huskies trailed in from all sides.

There was no cessation in the battle of the fangs. It began with the first brute arrivals. It continued from dawn through the day, and around the camp-fires at night. There was never an end to the strife between the dogs, and between the men and the dogs. The snow was stained and trailed with blood, and the scent of it added greater fierceness to the wolf-breeds. Half a dozen battles were fought to the death each day and night. Those that died were chiefly the south-bred curs—mixtures of mastiff,

Great Dane, and sheep-dogs—and the fatally slow Mackenzie hounds.

From its towering height the sentinel spruce frowned down upon the savage life that had come to outrage the grave it guarded. Yet beyond all this discord and bloody strife there was a great, throbbing human happiness—a beating of honest hearts filled to overflowing with the joys of the moment, a welding of new friendships, a renewal of old ones, a closer union of the brotherhood that holds together all things under the cold gray of the northern skies.

There were no bickerings among the hunters, no anger of man against man in the fierce voices that emphasized the slashing cuts of the caribou-whips. If the fangs of a Hudson's Bay husky let out the life-blood from the soft throat of a Mackenzie hound, it was a matter of the dogs, and not of their owners. They did not quarrel.

One day a fierce Eskimo pack cornered a giant husky under the big spruce, and slew him. When Cummins came from the company's store in the afternoon, he saw a number of men, with bared heads, working about the grave. He drew near enough to

see that they were building around it a barricade of saplings; and his breath choked him as he turned to the cabin and Mélisse. He noticed, too, that no fires were built near the spot consecrated to the memory of the dead woman; and to his cabin the paths in the snow became deeper and wider where trod the wild forest men who came to look upon the little Mélisse.

These were days of unprecedented prosperity and triumph for the baby, as they were for the company. The cabin was half filled with strange things, for all who came gave something to Mélisse. There were polar bears' teeth, brought down by the little black men who in turn had got them from the coast people; strange gods carved from wood; bits of fur, bushy fox tails, lynx paws, dried fruits, candy bought at fabulous prices in the store, and musk—always and incessantly musk—from Mukee's people of the west barrens.

To Jan this homage to Mélisse was more than gratifying. It formed a bond between him and Cummins' people. His heart went out to them, and he went more freely among them, and made friends.

CHAPTER VII

THE CARIBOU CARNIVAL

JAN had not played upon his violin since the coming of Jean de Gravois; but one evening he tuned his strings, and said to Mélisse:

"They have been good to you, my Mélisse. I will give them ze museek of ze *violon.*"

It was the big night at the post—the night that is known from Athabasca to Hudson's Bay as the night of the caribou roast. A week had passed, and there were no more furs to be disposed of. In the company's ledger each man had received his credit, and in the company's store the furs were piled high and safe. Three caribou had been killed by Per-ee and his hunters; and on this night, when Jan took down his violin from its peg on the wall, a huge fire blazed in the open, and on spits six inches in diameter the caribou were roasting.

The air was filled with the sound and odor of the

carnival. Above the fighting and snarling of dogs, the forest people lifted their voices in wild celebration, forgetting, in this one holiday of the year, the silence that they would carry back into the solitudes with them. Numbers gave them courage of voice, and in its manifestation there was the savagery of the forests that hemmed them in. Shrill voices rose in meaningless cries above the roaring of the fire. Caribou whips snapped fiercely. Chippewayans, Crees, Eskimos, and breeds crowded in the red glare. The factor's men shouted and sang like mad, for this was the company's annual "good time"—the show that would lure many of these same men back again at the end of another trapping season.

Huge boxes of white bread were placed near to the fire. A tub of real butter, brought five thousand miles from across the sea for the occasion, was set on a gun-case thrown where the heat played upon it in yellow glory. In a giant copper kettle, over a smaller fire, bubbled and steamed half a barrel of coffee.

The richness of the odors that drifted in the air set the dogs gathering upon their haunches beyond

the waiting circle of masters, their lips dripping, their fangs snapping in an eagerness that was not for the flesh of battle. And above it all there gleamed down a billion stars from out of the skies, the aurora flung its banners through the pale night, and softly the smoke rose straight up and then floated into the North, carried there by the gentle breath that spring was luring from out of the South.

Jan picked his way through the cordon of dogs and the inner circle of men until he stood with the firelight flashing in his glossy hair and black eyes, and there, seated upon the edge of one of the bread-boxes, he began to play.

It was not the low, sweet music of Cummins and the little Mélisse that he played now, but a wild, wailing song that he had found in the autumn winds. It burst above the crackling fire and the tumult of man and dog in a weird and savage beauty that hushed all sound; and life about him became like life struck suddenly dead. With his head bowed Jan saw nothing—saw nothing of the wonder in the faces of the half-cringing little black men who were squatted in a group a dozen feet away, nothing of

the staring amazement in the eyes that were looking upon this miracle he was performing. He knew only that about him there was a deep hush, and after a while his violin sang a lower song, and sweeter; and still softer it became, and more sweet, until he was playing that which he loved most of all—the music that had filled the little cabin when Cummins' wife died.

As he continued to play there came an interruption to the silence—a low refrain that was almost like that of the moaning wind. It grew beyond the tense circle of men, until a song of infinite sadness rose from the throats of a hundred dogs in response to Jan Thoreau's violin. To Jan, it was like the song of life. The unending loneliness and grief of it stirred him to the quick of his soul, and unconsciously his voice rose and fell softly with the wailing of the brute chorus. But to the others it was a thing that rose portentous above their understanding, a miracle of mystery that smote them with awe even as they surrendered themselves to the wonderful sweetness of the music.

Cummins saw the change in his people, and un-

derstood what it meant. He saw the surrounding cordon become thinner as man crushed closer to man, and he saw strained faces turned from the player to where the dogs sat full-throated upon their haunches, with their heads pointed straight to the stars in the sky.

Suddenly he burst into a volume of wild song, and made his way through the crouching Eskimos to Jan.

"For the love of Heaven, play no more of that!" he cried in the boy's ear. "Play something fast!"

Jan lifted his head as if from a dream. In an instant he perceived the strange effect of his music, and his bow raced across the strings of his violin in a rhythm swift and buoyant, his voice rising shrill and clear in words familiar to them all:

"Oh, ze cariboo-oo-oo, ze cariboo-oo-oo,
He roas' on high,
Jes' under ze sky,
Ze beeg white cariboo-oo-oo!"

With a yell Cummins joined in, waving his arms and leaping in the firelight. The spell was broken.

Williams and Mukee and the rest of the company's men burst forth in song; Jan's violin leaped in crescendos of stirring sound; and where before there had been a silent circle of awestruck men there was now a yelling din of voices.

The dogs lowered their heads again, and licked their chops at the odors in the air. With a yell Mukee and three Crees dashed toward the fire, long-hooked poles in their hands; and as the caribou carcasses were turned upon their huge spits, and their dripping fat fell sizzling into the flames, the wild chorus of men and dogs and Jan's violin rose higher, until Cummins' great voice became only a whisper in the tumult.

The third caribou had been twice turned upon its spit, and Mukee and his Crees paused in waiting silence, their hooked poles gripping the long bar that rested horizontally across the arms of two stout posts driven into the earth close to the fire. At this signal there was a final outburst from the waiting horde, and then a momentary silence fell as Cummins sprang upon one of the bread-boxes and waved his arms frantically above his head.

"Now!" he shouted. "Now! 'Ze cariboo-oo-oo—'"

With eyes flashing with excitement, Jan stood before Cummins, and his violin shrieked out the wild tune to a still wilder response of untamed voices.

"Now!" yelled Cummins again.

The wilderness song, that was known from Athabasca to Hudson's Bay, burst forth in a savage enthusiasm that reached to the skies:

"Oh, ze cariboo-oo-oo, ze cariboo-oo-oo,
He roas' on high,
Jes' under ze sky,
Ze beeg white cariboo-oo-oo!"

Cummins drew his revolver and blazed fiercely into the air.

"Now!" he shrieked.

"Oh, ze cariboo-oo-oo, ze cariboo-oo-oo,
He brown 'n' juice 'n' sweet!
Ze cariboo-oo-oo, he ver' polite—
He roas' on high,
Jes' under ze sky,
He ready now to come 'n' eat!"

With yells that rose above the last words of the song, Mukee and his Crees tugged at their poles, and the roasted caribou fell upon the snow. Jan drew back, and with his violin hugged under one arm, watched the wild revelers as, with bared knives flashing in the firelight, they crowded to the feast. Williams, the factor, who was puffing from his vocal exertions, joined him.

"Looks like a fight, doesn't it, Jan? Once I saw a fight at a caribou roast."

"So did I," said Jan, who had not taken his eyes from the jostling crowd.

"It was far to the west and north," continued Williams; "beyond the Great Slave country."

"Far beyond," said Jan, lifting his eyes quietly. "It was ver' near to ze Great Bear."

The factor stared at him in amazement.

"You saw it?" he exclaimed.

But Jan turned away, as if he had heard nothing, and passed beyond the packs of waiting dogs to restore his precious violin to its peg on the cabin wall. The factor's words had stirred deep memories within him, and for the first time since he had come to

the post he spoke no word to Mélisse when he found her wakeful and friendly in her cot.

Neither was it the old Jan Thoreau who returned to the excitement about the great fire. With his long hunting-knife flashing above his head, he plunged into the throng around the caribou, crowding and jostling with the others, his voice rising in shrill cries as he forced himself through to the edge of the fire. Cummins was there, kneeling with turned-up sleeves and greasy hands beside the huge roast, and when he saw Jan he stared at him in wonder. There was neither laughter nor song in Jan Thoreau's voice. It was vibrant with a strange savageness which was more savage than the wildest yells of the half-breed Crees, and his great eyes burned fiercely as they rested for an instant upon Cummins' face.

Close behind Cummins stood Williams. Jan saw him, and his knife dropped to his side. Then, so quickly that the startled factor drew back a step, Jan sprang to him.

"Ze fight at ze Great Bear!" he cried in swift eagerness. "For who you fight at ze Great Bear?"

The factor was silent, and the muscles of his arms grew like steel as he saw the madness in Jan's face. Suddenly he reached out and gripped the boy's wrists. Jan made no effort to evade the clutch.

"For who you fight?" he cried again. "For who you fight at ze Great Bear?"

"We tried to kill a man, but he got away," said Williams, speaking so low that only Jan heard. "He was—" The factor stopped.

"Ze missioner!" panted Jan.

The wild light went out of his eyes as he stared up at Williams, and the softer glow which came into them loosened at once the factor's grip on the boy's wrists.

"Yes, the missioner!"

Jan drew back. He evaded meeting the eyes of Cummins as he made his way among the men. There was a new burst of song as Mukee and his Crees pulled down a second caribou, but the boy paid no attention to the fresh excitement. He thrust his knife into its sheath and ran—ran swiftly through the packs of dogs fighting and snarling over the scraps that had been thrown to them; past Maballa,

who was watching the savage banquet around the big fire, and into the little cabin, to Mélisse.

Here he flung himself upon his knees, and for the first time he caught the baby in his arms, holding her close to him, and rocking her to and fro, as he cried out sobbingly the words which she did not understand.

"An' when I fin' heem an' kill heem, I will come back to you, my angel Mélisse," he whispered. "And then you will luf Jan Thoreau for letting out the blood of a missioner!"

He put her back into the little bed, kissed her again, took down his violin from its peg in the wall, and turned to the door.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHT AT DAWN

FOR a few moments Jan stood with his back to Mélisse and his eyes upon the carnival about the great fire. As he looked, the third caribou was pulled down from its spit, and the multitude of dogs rushed in upon the abandoned carcasses of the other two.

He caught his breath quickly as a loud shout and the wailing yelp of a hurt dog rose for an instant above all other sounds. Only one thing was wanting to complete another picture in his brain—a scene which had burned itself into his life for ever, and which he strove to fight back as he stood staring from the doorway. He half expected it to come—the shrill scream of a boyish voice, an instant's sullen quiet, then the low-throated thunder of impending vengeance—and the fight!

With marvelous quickness his excited mind re-

constructed the scene before him into the scene that had been. He heard the scream again, which had been *his* voice; saw, as if in a dream, the frenzied rush of men and the flash of knives; and then, from where he lay trampled and bleeding in the snow, the long, lean team of swift huskies that had carried in mad flight the one whose life those knives sought.

Williams had been there; he had seen the fight—his knife had flashed with the others in its demand for life. And yet he—Jan Thoreau—had not been recognized by the factor out there beside the caribou roast!

He hurried toward the fire. Half-way across the open he stopped. From out of the forest opposite Cummins' cabin there trailed slowly a team of dogs. In the shadows of the spruce, hidden from the revelers, the team halted. Jan heard the low voices of men, and a figure detached itself from the gloom, walking slowly and in the manner of one near to exhaustion in the direction of the carnival.

It was a new team. It had come from the trails to the east, and Jan's heart gave a sudden jump as he thought of the missionary who was expected with

the overdue mail. At first he had a mind to intercept the figure laboring across the open, but without apparent reason he changed his course and approached the sledge.

As he came nearer, he observed a second figure, which rose from behind the dogs and advanced to meet him. A dozen paces ahead of the team it stopped and waited.

"Our dogs are so near exhaustion that we're afraid to take them any nearer," said a voice. "They'd die like puppies under those packs!"

The voice thrilled Jan. He advanced with his back to the fire, so that he could see the stranger.

"You come from Churchill?" he asked.

His words were hardly a question. They were more of an excuse for him to draw nearer, and he turned a little, so that for an instant the glowing fire flashed in his eyes.

"Yes, we started from the Etawney just a week ago to-day."

Jan had come very near. The stranger interrupted himself to stare into the thin, fierce face that had grown like a white cameo almost within reach of

him. With a startled cry, he drew a step back, and Jan's violin dropped to the snow.

For no longer than a breath there was silence. The man wormed himself back into the shadows inch by inch, followed by the white face of the boy. Then there came shrilly from Jan's lips the mad shrieking of a name, and his knife flashed as he leaped at the other's breast.

The stranger was quicker than he. With a sudden movement he cleared himself of the blow; and as Jan's arm went past him, the point of the knife ripping his coat-sleeve, he shot out a powerful fist and sent the boy reeling to the ground.

Stunned and bleeding, Jan dragged himself to his knees. He saw the dogs turning, heard a low voice urging them to the trail, and saw the sledge disappear into the forest. He staggered from his knees to his feet, and stood swaying in his weakness. Then he followed.

He forgot that he was leaving his knife in the snow, forgot that back there about the fire there were other dogs and other men. He only knew that once before he had seen a sledge slip off into the

wilderness; that its going had left him a life of hatred and bitterness and desire for vengeance; and that this was the same man who was slipping away from him in the same way again.

He followed, sickened by the blow, but gaining strength as he pursued. Ahead of him he could hear the sound of the toboggan and the cautious lashing of a whip over the backs of the tired huskies. The sounds filled him with fierce strength. He wiped away the warm trickle of blood that ran over his cheek, and began to run, slowly at first, swinging in the easy wolf-lope of the forest runner, with his elbows close to his sides.

At that pace he could have followed for hours, losing when the pack took a spurt, gaining when they lagged, an insistent Nemesis just behind when the weighted dogs lay down in their traces. But there was neither the coolness of Mukee nor the cleverness of Jean de Gravois in the manner of Jan's running. When he heard the cracking of the whip growing fainter, he dropped his arms straight to his sides and ran more swiftly, his brain reeling with the madness of his desire to reach the sledge—to drag

from it the man who had struck him, to choke life from the face that haunted that mental picture of his, grinning at him and gloating always from the shadow world, just beyond the pale, sweet loveliness of the woman who lived in it.

That picture came to him now as he ran, more and more vividly, and from out of it the woman urged him on to the vengeance which she demanded of him, her great eyes glowing like fire, her beautiful face torn with the agony which he had last seen in it in life.

To Jan Thoreau there seemed almost to come from that face a living voice, crying to him its prayer for retribution, pleading with him to fasten his lithe, brown hands about the throat of the monster upon the sledge ahead, and choke from it all life. It drove reason from him, leaving him with the one thought that the monster was almost within reach; and he replied to the prayer with the breath that came in moaning exhaustion from between his lips.

He did not feel the soft, sun-packed snow under the beat of his feet. He received the lash of low-hanging bushes without experiencing the sensation

of their sting. Only he knew that he wanted air—more and more air; and to get it he ran with open mouth, struggling and gasping for it, and yet not knowing that Jean de Gravois would have called him a fool for the manner in which he sought it.

He heard more and more faintly the run of the sledge. Then he heard it no longer, and even the cracking of the whip died away. His heart swelled in a final bursting effort, and he plunged on, until at last his legs crumpled under him and he pitched face downward in the snow, like a thing stung by sudden death.

It was then, with his scratched and bleeding face lying in the snow, that reason began to return to him. After a little while he dragged himself weakly to his knees, still panting from the mad effort he had made to overtake the sledge. From a great distance he heard faintly the noise of shouting, the whispering echo of half a hundred voices, and he knew that the sound came from the revelers at the post. It was proof to him that there had been no interruption to the carnival, and that the scene at the edge of the forest had been witnessed by none.

Quickly his mental faculties readjusted themselves. He rose to his feet, and for a few moments stood hesitatingly. He had no weapon; but as his hand rested upon the empty knife-sheath at his belt, there came to him a thought of the way in which Mukee had avenged Cummins' wife, and he turned again upon the trail. He no longer touched the low-hanging bushes. He was no more than a shadow, appearing and disappearing without warning, trailing as the white ermine follows its prey, noiseless, alert, his body responding sinuously and without apparent effort to the working commands of his brain.

Where the forest broke into an open, lighted by the stars, he found blood in the footprints of the leading dog. Half-way across the open, he saw where the leader had swung out from the trail and the others of the pack had crowded about him, to be urged on by the lashings of the man's whip. Other signs of the pack's growing exhaustion followed close.

The man now traveled beside the sledge where the trail was rough, and rode where it was smooth and

hard. The deep imprints of his heeled boots in the soft snow showed that he ran for only a short distance at a time—a hundred yards or less—and that after each running spell he brought the pack to a walk. He was heavy and lacked endurance, and this discovery brought a low cry of exultation to Jan's lips.

He fell into a dog-trot. Mile after mile dropped behind him; other miles were ahead of him, an endless wilderness of miles, and through them the tired pack persisted, keeping always beyond sound and vision.

The stars began fading out of the skies. The shadows of the forest grew deeper and blacker, and where the aurora had lightened the heavens there crept the somber gray film that preceded dawn by three hours.

Jan followed more and more slowly. There was hard-breathing effort now in his running—effort that caused him physical pain and discomfort. His feet stumbled occasionally in the snow; his legs, from thigh to knee, began to ache with the gnawing torment that centers in the marrowbone; and with

this beginning of the "runner's cramp" he was filled with a new and poignant terror.

Would the dogs beat him out? Sloughing in the trail, bleeding at every foot, would they still drag their burden beyond the reach of his vengeance? The fear fastened itself upon him, urging him to greater effort, and he called upon the last of his strength in a spurt that carried him to where the thick spruce gave place to thin bush, and the bush to the barren and rocky side of a huge ridge, up which the trail climbed strong and well defined. For a few paces he followed it, then slipped and rolled back as the fatal paralysis deadened all power of movement in his limbs. He lay where he fell, moaning out his grief with his wide-staring eyes turned straight up into the cold gray of the starless sky.

For a long time he was motionless. From the top of the ridge, where the trail cut over the mountain, he looked like a bit of fire-blackened wood half buried in the snow. Half-way up the ridge a wolf, slinking hungrily, sniffed first up the trail and then down, and broke the stillness of the gray night-end with a mournful howl. It did not stir Jan Thoreau.

Long after the wolf had passed on, he moved a little, twisting himself so that his eyes could follow the tracks made by the sledge and dogs. When he came to where the snow-covered backbone of the ridge cut itself in faint outline against the desolate coldness of the sky, there fell from him the first sound of returning life. Up there he was sure that he had seen something move—an object which at first he had taken for a bush, and which he knew was not the wolf.

He watched for its reappearance, until all sorts of gray dawn shadows danced before his eyes. Then he began slowly to crawl up the trail. Some of the dull, paralytic ache was gone from his limbs, and as he worked his blood began to warm them into new strength, until he stood up and sniffed like an animal in the wind that was coming over the ridge from the south.

There was something in that wind that thrilled him. It stung his nostrils to a quick sensing of the nearness of something that was human. He smelled smoke. In it there was the pungent odor of green balsam, mixed with a faint perfume of pitch pine;

and because the odor of pitch grew stronger as he ascended, he knew that it was a small fire that was making the smoke, with none of the fierce, dry woods to burn up the smell. It was a fire hidden among the rocks, a tiny fire, over which the fleeing missioner was cooking his breakfast.

Jan almost moaned aloud in his gladness, and the old mad strength returned to his body. Near the summit of the ridge he picked up a club. It was a short, thick club, with the heavy end knotted and twisted.

Cautiously he lifted his face over the rocks, and looked out upon a plateau, still deep in snow, swept bare by the winter's winds, and covered with rocks and bushes. His face was so white that at a little distance it might have been taken for a snow hare. It went whiter when, a few yards away, he saw the fire, the man, and the dogs.

The man was close to the little blaze, his broad shoulders hunched over, steadying a small pot over the flame. Beyond him were the dogs huddled about the sledge, inanimate as death.

Jan drew himself over the rocks. Once he had

seen a big-footed lynx creep upon a wide-awake fox, and like that lynx he crept upon the man beside the fire. One of the tired dogs moved, and his pointed nostrils quivered in the air. Jan lay flat in the snow. Then the dog's muzzle dropped between his paws, and the boy moved on.

Inch by inch he advanced. The inches multiplied themselves into a foot, the foot lengthened into yards, and still the man remained hunched over his simmering pot.

Jan rose gently from his hands and knees to his feet, a furnace of madness blazing in his eyes. The restless dog raised his head again. He sniffed danger—near, menacing danger—and sprang up with a snarling cry that brought the man over the fire to quick attention. In a flash Jan took the last leap, and his club crashed down upon the missioner's head. The man pitched over like a log, and with a shrill cry the boy was at his throat.

"I am Jan Thoreau!" he shrieked. "I am Jan Thoreau—Jan Thoreau—come to keel you!" He dropped his club, and was upon the man's chest, his slender fingers tightening like steel wire about the

thick throat of his enemy. "I keel you slow—slow!" he cried, as the missioner struggled weakly.

The great thick body heaved under him, and he put all his strength into his hands. Something struck him in the face. Something struck him again and again, but he felt neither the pain nor the force of it, and his voice sobbed out his triumph as he choked. The man's hands reached up and tore at his hair; but Jan saw only the missioner's mottled face growing more mottled, and his eyes staring in greater agony up into his own.

"I am Jan Thoreau," he panted again and again. "I am Jan Thoreau, an' I keel you—keel you!"

The blood poured from his face. It blinded him until he could no longer see the one from which he was choking life. He bent down his head to escape the blows. The man's body heaved more and more; it turned until he was half under it; but still he hung to the thick throat, as the weasel hangs in tenacious death to the jugular of its prey.

The missioner's weight was upon him in crushing force now. His huge hands struck and tore at the boy's head and face, and then they had fastened

themselves at his neck. Jan was conscious of a terrible effort to take in breath, but he was not conscious of pain. The clutch did not frighten him. It did not make him loosen his grip. His fingers dug deeper. He strove to cry out still his words of triumph; but he could make no sound, except a gasping like that which came from between the gaping jaws of the man whose life his body and soul were fighting to smother.

There was death in each of the two grips; but the man's was the stronger, and his neck was larger and tougher, so that after a time he staggered to his knees and then to his feet, while Jan lay upon his back, his face and hair red with blood, his eyes wide open and with a lifeless glare in them. The missioner looked down upon his victim in horror. As the life that had nearly ebbed out of him poured back into his body, he staggered among the dogs, fastened them to the sledge, and urged them down the mountain into the plain. There was soon no sound of the sledge.

From a bush a dozen yards away a wondering moose-bird had watched the terrible struggle. Now

he hopped boldly upon Jan's motionless body, and perked his head inquisitively as he examined the strange face, covered with blood and twisted in torture.

The gray film of dawn dissolved itself into the white beginning of day. Far to the south, a bit of the red sunrise was creeping into the northern world.

CHAPTER IX

JEAN AND JAN

HALF a mile down the ridge, where it sloped up gradually from the forests and swamps of the plain, a team of powerful Malemutes were running at the head of a toboggan. On the sledge was a young half-Cree woman. Now beside the sledge, now at the lead of the dogs, cracking his whip and shouting joyously, ran Jean de Gravois.

"Is it not beautiful, my Iowaka?" he cried for the hundredth time, in Cree, leaping over a three-foot boulder in his boundless enthusiasm. "Is this not the glorious world, with the sun just rising off there, and spring only a few days away? It is not like the cold chills at Churchill, which come up with the icebergs and stay there all summer! What do you think of your Jean de Gravois and his country now?"

Jean was bringing back with him a splendid young woman, with big, lustrous eyes, and hair that shone with the gloss of a raven's wing in the sun. She laughed at him proudly as he danced and leaped beside her, replying softly in Cree, which is the most beautiful language in the world, to everything that he said.

Jean leaped and ran, cracked his caribou whip, and shouted and sang until he was panting and red in the face. Just as Iowaka had called upon him to stop and get a second wind, the Malemutes dropped back upon their haunches where Jan Thoreau lay, twisted and bleeding, in the snow.

"What is this?" cried Jean.

He caught Jan's limp head and shoulders up in his arms, and called shrilly to Iowaka, who was disentangling herself from the thick furs in which he had wrapped her.

"It is the fiddler I told you about, who lives with Williams at Post Lac Bain!" he shouted excitedly in Cree. "He has been murdered! He has been choked to death, and torn to pieces in the face, as if by an animal!" Jean's eyes roved about as Iowaka kneeled

beside him. "What a fight!" he gasped. "See the footprints—a big man and a small boy, and the murderer has gone on a sledge!"

"He is warm," said Iowaka. "It may be that he is not dead."

Jean de Gravois sprang to his feet, his little black eyes flashing with a dangerous fire. In a single leap he was at the side of the sledge, throwing off the furs and bundles and all other objects except his rifle.

"He is dead, Iowaka. Look at the purple and black in his face. It is Jean de Gravois who will catch the murderer, and you will stay here and make yourself a camp. Hi-o-o-o-o!" he shouted to the Malemutes.

The team twisted sinuously and swiftly in the trail as he sped over the edge of the mountain. Upon the plain below he knelt upon the toboggan, with his rifle in front of him; and at his low, hissing commands, which reached no farther than the dogs' ears, the team stretched their long bodies in pursuit of the missioner and his huskies.

Jean knew that whoever was ahead of him was

not far away, and he laughed and hunched his shoulders when he saw that his magnificent Malemutes were making three times the speed of the huskies. It was a short chase. It led across the narrow plain and into a dense tangle of swamp, where the huskies had picked their way in aimless wandering until they came out in thick balsam and Banksian pine. Half a mile farther on, and the trail broke into an open which led down to the smooth surface of a lake, and two-thirds across the lake was the fleeing missioner.

The Malemute leader flung open his jaws in a deep baying triumph, and with a savage yell Jean cracked his caribou whip over his back. He saw the man ahead of him lean over the end of his sledge as he urged his dogs, but the huskies went no faster; and then he caught the glitter of something that flashed for a moment in the sun.

"Ah!" said Jean softly, as a bullet sang over his head. "He fires at Jean de Gravois!" He dropped his whip, and there was the warm glow of happiness in his little dark face as he leveled his rifle over the backs of his Malemutes. "He fires at Jean de

Gravois, and it is Jean who can hamstring a caribou at three hundred yards on the run!"

For an instant, at the crack of his rifle, there was no movement ahead; then something rolled from the sledge and lay doubled up in the snow. A hundred yards beyond it, the huskies stopped in a rabble and turned to look at the approaching strangers.

Beside it Jean stopped; and when he saw the face that stared up at him, he clutched his thin hands in his long black hair and cried out, in shrill amazement and horror:

"The saints in Heaven, it is the missioner from Churchill!"

He turned the man over, and found where his bullet had entered under one arm and come out from under the other. There was no spark of life left. The missioner was already dead.

"The missioner from Churchill!" he gasped again.

He looked up at the warm sun, and kicked the melting snow under his moccasined feet.

"It will thaw very soon," he said to himself, looking again at the dead man, "and then he will go into the lake."

He headed his Malemutes back to the forest. Then he ran out and cut the traces of the exhausted huskies, and with his whip scattered them in freedom over the ice.

"Go to the wolves!" he shouted in Cree. "Hide yourselves from the post, or Jean de Gravois will cut out your tongues and take your skins off alive!"

When he came back to the top of the mountain, Jean found Iowaka making hot coffee, while Jan was bundled up in furs near the fire.

"It is as I said," she called. "He is alive!"

Thus it happened that the return of Jean de Gravois to the post was even more dramatic than he had schemed it to be, for he brought back with him not only a beautiful wife from Churchill, but also the half dead Jan Thoreau from the scene of battle on the mountain. And in the mystery of it all he reveled for two days; for Jean de Gravois said not a word about the dead man on the lake beyond the forest, nor did the huskies come back into their bondage to give a hint of the missing missionary.

CHAPTER X

RED SNOW-FLOWERS

FROM the day after the caribou roast the fur-gatherers began scattering. The Eskimos left the next morning. On the second day Mukee's people from the west set off along the edge of the barrens. Most of the others left by ones and twos into the wildernesses to the south and east.

Less than a dozen still put off their return to the late spring trapping, and among these were Jean de Gravois and his wife. Jean waited until the third day. Then he went to see Jan. The boy was bolstered up in his cot, with Cummins balancing the little Mélisse on the edge of the bed when he came in.

For a time Jean sat and watched them in silence; then he made a sign to Cummins, who joined him at the door.

"I am going the Athabasca way to-day," he said.

"I wish to talk with the boy before I go. I have a word to say to him which no ears should hear but his own. Will it be right?"

"Talk to him as long as you like," said Cummins, "but don't worry him about the missionary. You'll not get a word from him."

Jan's eyes spoke with a devotion greater than words as Jean de Gravois came and sat close beside him. He knew that it was Jean who had brought him alive into the post, and now there was something in the suggestive grimacing of the Frenchman's face, and in the eagerness with which he looked over his shoulder, as if he was not quite sure but that the walls held ears, that caused the boy's heart to beat a little faster as he speculated upon what Jean was going to say.

For a few moments Jean looked at the other steadily, with his thin, black face propped in his hands and a curious smile on his lips. He twisted his face into a dozen expressions of a language as voluble as that of his tongue, hunched his shoulders up to his ears as he grinned at Jan, and chuckled between his grimaces.

"Ah, it was wan be-e-a-u-tiful fight!" he said softly. "You are a brave boy, Jan Thoreau!"

"You did not see it?" asked Jan.

Unconsciously the words came from him in French. Jean caught one of his thin hands and laughed joyfully, for the spirit of him was French to the bottom of his soul.

"I see it? No, neither I nor Iowaka; but there it was in the snow, as plain as the eyes in your face. And did I not follow the trail that staggered down the mountain, while Iowaka brought you back to life? And when I came to the lake, did I not see something black out upon it, like a charred log? And when I came to it, was it not the dead body of the missioner from Churchill? Eh, Jan Thoreau?"

Jan sat up in his bed with a sharp cry.

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" admonished Jean, pressing him back gently. "There is no need of telling what is out there on the lake. Only the Blessed Virgin made me dream last night that you would like to see with your own eyes that the missioner is dead. The thaw will open up the lake in a few days. Then he will go down in the first slush. And"— Jean

looked about him cautiously again, and whispered low— "if you see anything about the dead missioner that you do not understand—*think of Jean de Gravois!*"

He rose to his feet and bent over Jan's white face.

"I am going the Athabasca way to-day," he finished. "Perhaps, Jan Thoreau, you will hear after a time that it would be best for Jean de Gravois never to return again to this Post Lac Bain. If so, you will find him between Fond du Lac and the Beaver River, and you can make it in four days by driving your dogs close to the scrub-edge of the barrens, keeping always where you can see the musk-ox to the north." He turned to the door, and hesitated there for a moment, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. "Jean de Gravois wonders if Jan Thoreau understands?" he said, and passed out.

When Cummins returned, he found Jan's cheeks flushed and the boy in a fever.

"Devil take that Gravois!" he growled.

"He has been a brother to me," said Jan simply. "I love him."

On the second day after the Frenchman's de-

parture, Jan rose free of the fever which had threatened him for a time, and in the afternoon he harnessed Cummins' dogs. The last of the trappers had started from the post that morning, their sledges and dogs sinking heavily in the deepening slush; and Jan set off over the smooth toboggan trail made by the company's agent in his return to Fort Churchill.

This trail followed close along the base of the ridge upon which he had fought the missionary, joining that of Jean de Gravois miles beyond. Jan climbed the ridge. From where he had made his attack, he followed the almost obliterated trail of the Frenchman and his Malemutes until he came to the lake; and then he knew that Jean de Gravois had spoken the truth, for he found the missionary with his face half buried in the slush, stark dead.

He no longer had to guess at the meaning of Jean's words. The bullet-hole under the dead man's arms was too large to escape eyes like Jan's. Into the little hidden world which he treasured in his heart there came another face, to remain always with him—the face of the courageous little forest

dandy who was hurrying with his bride back into the country of the Athabasca.

Jan allowed his dogs to walk all the way back to the post, and it was dusk before they arrived. Maballa had prepared supper, and Cummins was waiting for him. He glanced sharply at the boy. There was a smile on Jan's lips, and there was something in his eyes which Cummins had never seen there before. From that night they were no longer filled with the nervous, glittering flashes which at times had given him an appearance almost of madness. In place of their searching suspicions, there was a warmer and more companionable glow, and Cummins felt the effect of the change as he ate his caribou steak and talked once more entirely of Mélisse.

A Cree trapper had found Jan's violin in the snow, and had brought it to Maballa. Before Cummins finished his supper, the boy began to play, and he continued to play until the lights at the post went out and both the man and the child were deep in sleep. Then Jan stopped. There was the fire of a keen wakefulness in his eyes as he carefully unfastened the strings of his instrument, and held it

close to the oil lamp, so that he could peer down through the narrow aperture in the box.

He looked again at Cummins. The man was sleeping with his face to the wall. With the hooked wire which he used for cleaning his revolver Jan fished gently at the very end of the box, and after three or four efforts the wire caught in something soft, which he pulled toward him. Through the bulge in the F-hole he dragged forth a small, tightly rolled cylinder of faded red cloth.

For a few moments he sat watching the deep breathing of Cummins, unrolling the cloth as he watched, until he had spread out upon the table before him a number of closely written pages of paper. He weighted them at one end with his violin, and held them down at the other with his hands. The writing was in French. Several of the pages were in a heavy masculine hand, the words running one upon another so closely that in places they seemed to be connected; and from them Jan took his fingers, so that they rolled up like a spring. Over the others he bent his head, and there came from him a low, sobbing breath.

On these pages the writing was that of a woman, and from the paper there still rose a faint, sweet scent of heliotrope. For half an hour Jan gazed upon them, reading the words slowly, until he came to the last page.

When there came a movement from over against the wall, he lifted for an instant a pair of startled eyes. Cummins was turning in his sleep. Soundlessly Jan tiptoed across the floor, opened the door, without disturbing the slumbering man and went out into the night. In the south and east there glowed a soft blaze of fire where the big spring moon was coming up over the forest. As Jan turned his face toward it, a new and strange longing crept into his heart. He stretched out his arms, with the papers and his violin clutched in his hands, as if from out of that growing glory a wonderful spirit was calling to him.

For the first time in his lonely life it came to him —this call of the great world beyond the wilderness; and suddenly he crushed the woman's letter to his lips, and his voice burst from him in whispering, thrilling eagerness:

"I will come to you—some day—w'en ze leetle Mélisse come too!"

He rolled the written pages together, wrapped them in the faded red cloth, and concealed them again in the box of his violin before he reëntered the cabin.

The next morning Cummins stood in the door, and said:

"How warm the sun is! The snow and ice are going, Jan. It's spring. We'll house the sledges to-day, and begin feeding the dogs on fish."

Each day thereafter the sun rose earlier, the day was longer, and the air was warmer; and with the warmth there now came the sweet scents of the budding earth and the myriad sounds of the deep, unseen life of the forest, awakening from its long slumber in its bed of snow. Moose-birds chirped their mating songs and flirted from morning until night in bough and air; ravens fluffed themselves in the sun; and snowbirds—little black-and-white beauties that were wont to whisk about like so many flashing gems—changed their color from day to day until they became new creatures in a new world.

The poplar buds swelled in their joy until they split like overfat peas. The mother bears come out of their winter dens, accompanied by little ones born weeks before, and taught them how to pull down the slender saplings for these same buds. The moose returned from the blizzardy tops of the great ridges, where for good reasons they had passed the winter, followed by the wolves who fed upon their weak and sick. Everywhere were the rushing torrents of melting snow, the crackle of crumbling ice, the dying frost-cries of rock and earth and tree; and each night the pale glow of the aurora borealis crept farther and farther toward the pole in its fading glory.

The post fell back into its old ways. Now and then a visitor came in from out of the forest, but he remained for only a day or two, taking back into the solitude with him a few of the necessaries of life. Williams was busy preparing his books for the coming of the company's chief agent from London, and Cummins, who was helping the factor, had a good deal of extra time on his hands.

Before the last of the snow was gone, he and Jan began dragging in logs for an addition which they

planned for the little cabin. Basking out in the sun, with a huge bearskin for a floor, Mélisse looked upon the new home-building with wonderful demonstrations of interest. Cummins' face glowed with pleasure as she kicked and scrambled on the bearskin and gave shrill-voiced approval of their efforts.

Jan was the happiest youth in the world. It was certain that the little Mélisse understood what they were doing, and the word passed from Cummins and Jan to the others at the post, so that it happened frequently during the building operations that Mukee and Per-ee, and even Williams himself, would squat for an hour at a time in the snow near Mélisse, marveling at the early knowledge which the great God saw fit to put into a white baby's brain. This miracle came to be a matter of deep discussion, in which there were the few words but much thought of men born to silence. One day Mukee brought two little Indian babies and set them on the bearskin, where they continued to sit in stoic indifference—a clear proof of the superior development of Mélisse.

"I wouldn't be surprised to hear her begin talking at any time," confided Cummins to Jan, one evening

when the boy was tuning his violin. "She is nearly six months old."

"Do you suppose she would begin in French?" asken Jan, suddenly stopping the tightening of his strings.

Cummins stared.

"Why?"

Jan dropped his voice to an impressive whisper.

"Because I have heard her many times say, *'Bonbon—bonbon—bonbon'*—which means candee; and always I have given her candee, an' now ze leetle Mélisse say *'Bonbon'* all of ze time."

"Well," said Cummins, eying him in half belief. "Could it happen?"

Like a shot Jan replied:

"I began in Engleesh, an' Jan Thoreau is French!"

He began playing, but Cummins did not hear much of the music. He went to the door, and stared in lonely grief at the top of the tall spruce over the grave. Later he said to Jan:

"It would be bad if that were so. Give her no more sweet stuff when she says *'Bonbon,'* Jan. She must forget!"

The next day Jan tore down the sapling barricade around the woman's grave, and from noon until almost sunset he skirted the sunny side of a great ridge to the south. When he came back he brought with him a basket of the early red snow-flowers, with earth clinging to their roots. These he planted thickly over the mound under the spruce, and around its edge he put rows of the young shoots of Labrador tea and backneesh.

As the weather grew warmer, and spring changed into summer, he took Mélisse upon short excursions with him into the forests, and together they picked great armfuls of flowers and Arctic ferns. The grave was never without fresh offerings, and the cabin, with its new addition complete, was always filled with the beautiful things that spring up out of the earth.

Jan and Mélisse were happy; and in the joys of these two there was pleasure for the others of the post, as there had been happiness in the presence of the woman. Only upon Cummins had there settled a deep grief. The changes of spring and summer, bringing with them all that this desolate world held

of warmth and beauty, filled him with the excruciating pain of his great grief, as if the woman had died but yesterday.

When he first saw the red flowers glowing upon her grave, he buried his head in his arms and sobbed like a child. The woman had loved them. She had always watched for the first red blooms to shoot up out of the wet earth. A hundred times he had gone with her to search for them, and had fastened the first flower in the soft beauty of her hair. Those were the days when, like happy children, they had romped and laughed together out there beyond the black spruce. Often he had caught her up in his strong arms and carried her, tired and hungry but gloriously happy, back to their little home in the clearing, where she would sit and laugh at him as he clumsily prepared their supper.

Thoughts and pictures like these choked him and drove him off alone into the depths of the wilderness. When this spirit impelled him his moccasined feet would softly tread the paths they had taken in their wanderings; and at every turn a new memory would spring up before him, and he longed to fling himself

down there with the sweet spirit of the woman and die.

Little did he dream, at these times, that Jan and Mélisse were to cherish these same paths, that out of the old, dead joys there were to spring new joys, and that the new joys were to wither and die, even as his own—for a time. Beyond his own great sorrow he saw nothing in the future. He gave up Mélisse to Jan.

At last, his gaunt frame thinned by sleepless nights and days of mental torture, he said that the company's business was calling him to Churchill, and early in August he left for the bay.

CHAPTER XI

FOR HER

UPON Jan now fell a great responsibility. Mélisse was his own. Days passed before he could realize the fullness of his possession. He had meant to go by the Athabasca water route to see Jean de Gravois, leaving Mélisse to Cummins for a fortnight or so. Now he gave this up. Day and night he guarded the child; and to Jan's great joy it soon came to pass that whenever he was compelled to leave her for a short time, Mélisse would cry for him. At least Maballa assured him that this was so, and Mélisse gave evidence of it by her ecstatic joy when he returned.

When Cummins came back from Fort Churchill in the autumn, he brought with him a pack full of things for Mélisse, including new books and papers, for which he had spent a share of his season's earn-

ings. As he was freeing these treasures from their wrapping of soft caribou skin, with Jan and Mélisse both looking on, he stopped suddenly and glanced from his knees up at the boy.

"They're wondering over at Churchill what became of the missionary who left with the mail, Jan. They say he was last seen at the Etawney."

"And not here?" replied Jan quickly.

"Not that they know of," said Cummins, still keeping his eyes on the boy. "The man who drove him never got back to Churchill. They're wondering where the driver went, too. A company officer has gone up to the Etawney, and it is possible he may come over to Lac Bain. I don't believe he'll find the missionary."

"Neither do I," said Jan quite coolly. "He is probably dead, and the wolves and foxes have eaten him before this—or mebby ze feesh!"

Cummins resumed his task of unpacking, and among the books which he brought forth there were two which he gave to Jan.

"The supply ship from London came in while I was at Churchill, and those came with it," he ex-

plained. "They're school-books. There's going to be a school at Churchill next winter, and the winter after that it will be at York Factory, down on the Hayes." He settled back on his heels and looked at Jan. "It's the first school that has ever come nearer than four hundred miles of us. That's at Prince Albert."

For many succeeding days Jan took long walks alone in the forest trails, and silently thrashed out the two problems which Cummins had brought back from Churchill for him. Should he warn Jean de Gravois that a company officer was investigating the disappearance of the missionary?

At first his impulse was to go at once into Jean's haunts beyond the Fond du Lac, and give him the news. But even if the officer did come to Post Lac Bain, how would he know that the missionary was at the bottom of the lake, and that Jean de Gravois was accountable for it? So in the end Jan decided that it would be folly to stir up the little hunter's fears, and he thought no more of the company's investigator who had gone up to the Etawney.

But the second problem was one whose perplex-

ities troubled him. Cummins' word of the school at Churchill had put a new and thrilling thought into his head, and always with that thought he coupled visions of the growing Mélisse. This year the school would be at Churchill, and the next at York Factory, and after that it might be gone for ever, so that when Mélisse grew up there would be none nearer than what Jan looked upon as the other end of the world. Why could not he go to school for Mélisse, and store up treasures which in time he might turn over to her?

The scheme was a colossal one, by all odds the largest that had ever entered into his dreams of what life held for him—that he, Jan Thoreau, should learn to read and write, and do other things like the people of the far South, so that he might help to make the little creature in the cabin like her who slept under the watchful spruce. He was stirred to the depths of his soul, now with fear, again with hope and desire and ambition; and it was not until the first cold chills of approaching winter crept down from the north and east that the ultimate test came, and he told Cummins of his intention.

Once his mind was settled, Jan lost no time in putting his plans into action. Mukee knew the trail to Churchill, and agreed to leave with him on the third day—which gave Williams' wife time to make him a new coat of caribou skin.

On the second evening he played for the last time in the little cabin; and after Mélisse had fallen asleep he took her up gently in his arms and held her there for a long time, while Cummins looked on in silence. When he replaced her in the little bed against the wall, Cummins put one of his long arms about the boy's shoulders and led him to the door, where they stood looking out upon the grim desolation of the forest that rose black and silent against the starlit background of the sky. High above the thick tops of the spruce rose the lone tree over the grave, like a dark finger pointing up into the night, and Cummins' eyes rested there.

"She heard you first that night, Jan," he spoke softly. "She knew that you were coming long before I could hear anything but the crackling in the skies. I believe—she knows—now—"

The arm about Jan's shoulder tightened, and

Cummins' head dropped until his rough cheek rested upon the boy's hair. There was something of the gentleness of love in what he did, and in response to it Jan caught the hand that was hanging over his shoulder in both his own.

"Boy, won't you tell me who you are, and why you came that night?"

"I will tell you, now, that I come from ze Great Bear," whispered Jan. "I am only Jan Thoreau, an' ze great God made me come that night because"—his heart throbbed with sudden inspiration as he looked up into his companion's face—"because ze leetle Mélisse was here," he finished.

For a time Cummins made no move or sound; then he drew the boy back into the cabin, and from the little gingham-covered box in the corner he took a buckskin bag.

"You are going to Churchill for Mélisse and for *her*," he said in a voice pitched low that it might not awaken the baby. "Take this."

Jan drew a step back.

"No, I fin' work with ze compan-ee at Churchill.

That is ze gold for Mélisse when she grow up. Jan Thoreau is no—what you call heem?"

His teeth gleamed in a smile, but it lasted only for an instant. Cummins' face darkened, and he caught him firmly, almost roughly, by the arm.

"Then Jan Thoreau will never come back to Mélisse," he exclaimed with finality. "You are going to Churchill to be at school, and not to work with your hands. *They* are sending you. Do you understand, boy? *They!*" There was a fierce tremor in his voice. "Which will it be? Will you take the bag, or will you never again come back to Lac Bain?"

Dumbly Jan reached out and took the buckskin pouch. A dull flush burned in his cheeks. Cummins looked in wonder upon the strange look that came into his eyes.

"I pay back this gold to you and Mélisse a hundred times!" he cried tensely. "I swear it, an' I swear that Jan Thoreau mak' no lie!"

Unconsciously, with the buckskin bag clutched in one hand, he had stretched out his other arm to the

violin hanging against the wall. Cummins turned to look. When he faced him again the boy's arm had fallen to his side and his cheeks were white.

The next day he left. No one heard his last words to Mélisse, or witnessed his final leave-taking of her, for Cummins sympathized with the boy's grief and went out of the cabin an hour before Mukee was ready with his pack. The last that he heard was Jan's violin playing low, sweet music to the child. Three weeks later, when Mukee returned to Lac Bain, he said that Jan had traveled to Churchill like one who had lost his tongue, and that far into the nights he had played lonely dirges upon his violin.

CHAPTER XII

A RUMOR FROM THE SOUTH

IT was a long winter for Cummins and Mélisse. It was a longer one for Jan. He had taken with him a letter from the factor at Lac Bain to the factor at Churchill, and he found quarters with the chief clerk's assistant at the post—a young, red-faced man who had come over on the ship from England. He was a cheerful, good-natured young fellow, and when he learned that his new associate had tramped all the way from the Barren Lands to attend the new public school, he at once invested himself with the responsibilities of a private tutor.

He taught Jan, first of all, to say *"is"* in place of *"ees."* It was a tremendous lesson for Jan, but he struggled with it manfully, and a week after his arrival, when one evening he was tuning his violin to play for young MacDonald, he said with eager gravity:

"Ah, I have it now, Mr. MacDonald. It ees not *'ees,'* it ees *'ees!'* "

MacDonald roared, but persisted, and in time Jan began to get the twist out of his tongue.

The school opened in November, and Jan found himself one of twenty or so, gathered there from forty thousand square miles of wilderness. Two white youths and a half-breed had come from the Etawney; the factor at Nelson House sent up his son, and from the upper waters of the Little Churchill there came three others.

From the first, Jan's music found him a premier place in the interest of the tutor sent over by the company. He studied by night as well as by day, and by the end of the second month his only competitor was the youth from Nelson House. His greatest source of knowledge was not the teacher, but MacDonald. There was in him no inherent desire for the learning of the people to the south. That he was storing away, like a faithful machine, for the use of Mélisse. But MacDonald gave him that for which his soul longed—a picture of life as it existed in the wonderful world beyond the wilderness, to

which some strange spirit within him, growing stronger as the weeks and months passed, seemed projecting his hopes and his ambitions.

Between his thoughts of Mélisse and Lac Bain, he dreamed of that other world; and several times during the winter he took the little roll from the box of his violin, and read again and again the written pages that it contained.

"Some time I will go," he assured himself always. "Some time, when Mélisse is a little older, and can go too."

To young MacDonald, the boy from Lac Bain was a "find." The Scottish youth was filled with an immense longing for home; and as his homesickness grew, he poured more and more into Jan's attentive ears his knowledge of the world from which he had come. He told him the history of the old brass cannon that lay abandoned among the vines and bushes, where a fort had stood at Churchill many years before. He described the coming of the first ship into the great bay; told of Hudson and his men, of great wars that his listener had never dreamed of, of kings and queens and strange na-

tions. At night he read a great deal to Jan out of books that he had brought over with him.

As the weeks and months passed, the strange spirit that was calling to the forest boy out of that other world stirred more restlessly within him. At times it urged him to confide in MacDonald what was hidden away in the box of his violin.

The secret nearly burst from him one Sunday, when MacDonald said:

"I'm going home on the ship that comes over next summer. What do you say to going back with me, Jan?"

The spirit surged through Jan in a hot flood, and it was only an accident that kept him from saying what was in his heart.

They were standing with the icy bay stretching off in interminable miles toward the pole. A little way from them, the restless tide was beating up through the broken ice, and eating deeper into the frozen shore. From out of the bank there projected, here and there, the ends of dark, box-like objects, which, in the earlier days of the company, had been gun-cases. In them were the bones of men who had

lived and died an age ago; and as Jan looked at the silent coffins, now falling into the sea, another spirit —the spirit that bound him to Mélisse—entered into him, and he shuddered as he thought of what might happen in the passing of a year.

It was this spirit that won. In the spring, Jan went back to Lac Bain with the company's supplies. The next autumn he followed the school to York Factory, and the third year he joined it at Nelson House. Then the company's teacher died, and no one came to fill his place.

In midwinter of this third year, Jan returned to Lac Bain, and, hugging the delighted Mélisse close in his arms, he told her that never again would he go away without her. Mélisse, tightening her arms around his neck, made his promise sacred by offering her little rosebud of a mouth for him to kiss. Later, the restless spirit slumbering within his breast urged him to speak to Cummins.

"When Mélisse is a little older, should we not go with her into the South?" he said. "She must not live for ever in a place like this."

Cummins looked at him for an instant as if he

did not understand. When Jan's meaning struck home, his eyes hardened, and there was the vibrant ring of steel in his quiet voice.

"Her mother will be out there under the old spruce until the end of time," he said slowly; "and we will never leave her—unless, some day, Mélisse goes alone."

From that hour Jan no longer looked into the box of his violin. He struggled against the desire that had grown with his years until he believed that he had crushed it and stamped it out of his existence. In his life there came to be but one rising and one setting of the sun. Mélisse was his universe. She crowded his heart until beyond her he began to lose visions of any other world.

Each day added to his joy. He called her "my little sister," and with sweet gravity Mélisse called him "brother Jan," and returned in full measure his boundless love. He marked the slow turning of her flaxen hair into sunny gold, and month by month watched joyfully the deepening of that gold into warm shades of brown. She was to be like her mother! Jan's soul rejoiced, and in his silent way

Cummins offered up wordless prayers of thankfulness.

So matters stood at Post Lac Bain in the beginning of Méhosse's ninth year, when up from the south there came a rumor. As civil war spreads its deepest gloom, as the struggle of father against son and brother against brother stifles the breathing of nations, so this rumor set creeping a deep pall over the forest people.

Rumor grew into rumor. From the east, the south and the west they multiplied, until on all sides the Paul Reveres of the wilderness carried news that the Red Terror was at their heels, and the chill of a great fear swept like a shivering wind from the edge of civilization to the bay.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RED TERROR

NINETEEN years before these same rumors had come up from the south, and the Red Terror had followed. The horror of it still remained with the forest people; for a thousand unmarked graves, shunned like a pestilence, and scattered from the lower waters of James Bay to the lake country of the Athabasca, gave evidence of the toll it demanded.

From DuBrochet, on Reindeer Lake, authentic word first came to Lac Bain early in the winter. Henderson was factor there, and he passed up the warning that had come to him from Nelson House and the country to the southeast.

"There's smallpox on the Nelson," his messenger informed Williams, "and it has struck the Crees on Wollaston Lake. God only knows what it is doing to the bay Indians, but we hear that it is wiping out

the Chippewayans between the Albany and the Churchill." He left the same day with his winded dogs. "I'm off for the Révillon people to the west, with the compliments of our company," he explained.

Three days later, word came from Churchill that all of the company's servants and her majesty's subjects west of the bay should prepare themselves for the coming of the Red Terror. Williams' thick face went as white as the paper he held, as he read the words of the Churchill factor.

"It means dig graves," he said. "That's the only preparation we can make!"

He read the paper aloud to the men at Lac Bain, and every available man was detailed to spread the warning throughout the post's territory. There was a quick harnessing of dogs, and on each sledge that went out was a roll of red cotton cloth. Williams' face was still white as he passed these rolls out from the company's store. They were ominous of death, lurid signals of pestilence and horror, and the touch of them sent shuddering chills through the men who were about to scatter them among the forest people.

Jan went over the Churchill trail, and then swung southward along the Hasabala, where the country was crisscrossed with trap-lines of the half-breeds and the French. First, he struck the cabin of Croisset and his wife, and left part of his cloth. Then he turned westward, while Croisset harnessed his dogs and hurried with a quarter of the roll to the south. Between the Hasabala and Klokol Lake, Jan found three other cabins, and at each he left a bit of the red cotton. Forty miles to the south, somewhere on the Porcupine, were the lines of Henry Langlois, the post's greatest fox-hunter. On the morning of the third day, Jan set off in search of Langlois; and late in the afternoon of the same day he came upon a well-beaten snow-shoe trail. On this he camped until morning. When dawn came he began following it.

He passed half a dozen of Langlois' trap-houses. In none of them was there bait. In three the traps were sprung. In the seventh he found the remains of a red fox that had been eaten until there was little but the bones left. Two houses beyond there was an ermine in a trap, with its head eaten off. With

growing perplexity, Jan examined the snow-shoe trails in the snow. The most recent of them were days old. He urged on his dogs, stopping no more at the trap-houses, until, with a shrieking command, he brought them to a halt at the edge of a clearing cut in the forest. A dozen rods ahead of him was the trapper's cabin. Over it, hanging limply to a sapling pole, was the red signal of horror.

With a terrified cry to the dogs, Jan ran back, and the team turned about and followed him in a tangled mass. Then he stopped. There was no smoke rising from the clay chimney on the little cabin. Its one window was white with frost. Again and again he shouted, but no sign of life responded to his cries. He fired his rifle twice, and waited with his mittened hand over his mouth and nostrils. There was no reply. Then, abandoning hope, he turned back into the north, and gave his dogs no rest until he had reached Lac Bain.

His team came in half dead. Both Cummins and Williams rushed out to meet him as he drove up before the company's store.

"The red flag is over Langlois' cabin!" he cried.

"I fired my rifle and shouted. There is no life! Langlois is dead!"

"Great God!" groaned Williams.

His red face changed to a sickly pallor, and he stood with his thick hands clenched, while Cummins took charge of the dogs and Jan went into the store for something to eat.

Mukee and Per-ee returned to the post the next day. Young Williams followed close after them, filled with terror. He had found the plague among the Crees of the Waterfound.

Each day added to the gloom at Lac Bain. For a time Jan could not fully understand, and he still played his violin and romped joyfully with Mélisse in the little cabin. He had not lived through the plague of nineteen years before. Most of the others had, even to Mukee, the youngest of them all.

Jan did not know that it was this Red Terror that came like a Nemesis of the gods to cut down the people of the great Northland, until they were fewer in number than those of the Sahara desert. But he learned quickly. In February, the Crees along Wollaston Lake were practically wiped out. Red flags

marked the trail of the Nelson. Death leaped from cabin to cabin in the wilderness to the west. By the middle of the month, Lac Bain was hemmed in by the plague on all sides but the north.

The post's trap-lines had been shortened; now they were abandoned entirely, and the great fight began. Williams assembled his men, and told them how that same battle had been fought nearly two decades before. For sixty miles about the post every cabin and wigwam that floated a red flag must be visited—and burned if the occupants were dead. In learning whether life or death existed in these places lay the peril for those who undertook the task. It was a dangerous mission. It meant facing a death from which those who listened to the old factor shrank with dread; yet, when the call came, they responded to a man.

Cummins and Jan ate their last supper together, with Mélisse sitting between them and wondering at their silence. When it was over, the two went outside.

"Mukee wasn't at the store," said Cummins in a thick, strained voice, halting Jan in the gloom behind

the cabin. "Williams thought he was off to the south with his dogs. But he isn't. I saw him drag himself into his shack, like a sick dog, an hour before dusk. There'll be a red flag over Lac Bain in the morning."

Jan stifled the sharp cry on his lips.

"Ah, there's a light!" cried Cummins. "It's a pitch torch burning in front of his door!"

A shrill, quavering cry came from the direction of Mukee's cabin, and the two recognized it as the voice of the half-breed's father—a wordless cry, rising and dying away again and again, like the wailing of a dog. Sudden lights flashed into the night, as they had flashed years ago when Cummins staggered forth from his home with word of the woman's death. He gripped Jan's arm in a sudden spasm of horror.

"The flag is up *now!*" he whispered huskily. "Go back to Mélisse. There is food in the house for a month, and you can bring the wood in to-night. Bar the door. Open only the back window for air. Stay inside—with her—until it is all over. Go!"

"To the red flags, that is where I will go!" cried

Jan fiercely, wrenching his arm free. "It is your place to stay with Mélisse!"

"My place is with the men."

"And mine?" Jan drew himself up rigid.

"One of us must shut himself up with her," pleaded Cummins. "It must be you." His face gleamed white in the darkness. "You came—that night—because Mélisse was here. *Something* sent you—*something*—don't you understand? And since then she has never been near to death until now. You must stay with Mélisse—*with your violin!*"

"Mélisse herself shall choose," replied Jan. "We will go into the cabin, and the one to whom she comes first goes among the red flags. The other shuts himself in the cabin until the plague is gone."

He turned swiftly back to the door. As he opened it, he stepped aside to let Cummins enter first, and behind the other's broad back he leaped quickly to one side, his eyes glowing, his white teeth gleaming in a smile. Unseen by Cummins, he stretched out his arms to Mélisse, who was playing with the strings of his violin on the table.

He had done this a thousand times, and Mélisse

knew what it meant—a kiss and a joyous toss halfway to the ceiling. She jumped from her stool and ran to him; but this time, instead of hoisting her above his head, he hugged her up close to his breast, and buried his face in her soft hair. His eyes looked over her in triumph to Cummins.

"Up, Jan, up—'way up!" cried Mélisse.

He tossed her until she half turned in midair, kissed her again as he caught her in his arms, and set her, laughing and happy, on the edge of the table.

"I am going down among the sick Crees in Cummins' place," said Jan to Williams, half an hour later. "Now that the plague has come to Lac Bain, he must stay with Mélisse."

CHAPTER XIV

A LONG WAITING

THE next morning Jan struck out over his old trail to the Hasabala. The Crees were gone He spent a day swinging east and west, and found old trails leading into the north.

"They have gone up among the Eskimos," he said to himself. "Ah, Kazan, what in the name of the saints is that?"

The leading dog dropped upon his haunches with a menacing growl as a lone figure staggered across the snow toward them. It was Croisset. With a groan, he dropped upon the sledge.

"I am sick and starving!" he wailed. "The fiend himself has got into my cabin, and for three days I've had nothing but snow and a raw whisky-jack!"

"Sick!" cried Jan, drawing a step away from him.

"Yes, sick from an empty belly, and this, and this!" He showed a forearm done up in a bloody

rag, and pointed to his neck, from which the skin was peeling. "I was gone ten days with that red cloth you gave me; and when I came back, if there wasn't the horror itself grinning at me from the top of my own shanty! I tried to get in, but my wife barred the door, and said that she would shoot me if I didn't get back into the woods. I tried to steal in at night through a window, and she drenched me in hot water. I built a wigwam at the edge of the forest, and stayed there for five days. Hon-gree! Blessed saints, I had no matches, no grub; and when I got close enough to yell these things to her, she kept her word and plunked me through a crack in the door, so that I lost a pint of blood from this arm."

"I'll give you something to eat," laughed Jan, undoing his pack. "How long has the red flag been up?"

"I've lost all count of time, but it's twelve days, if an hour, and I swear it's going to take all winter to get it down!"

"It's not the plague. Go back and tell your wife so."

"And get shot for my pains!" groaned Croisset, digging into meat and biscuit. "I'm bound for Lac Bain, if you'll give me a dozen matches. That whisky-jack will remain with me until I die, for when I ate him I forgot to take out his insides!"

"You're a lucky man, Croisset. It's good proof that she loves you."

"If bullets and hot water and an empty belly are proofs, she loves me a great deal, Jan Thoreau! Though I don't believe she meant to hit me. It was a woman's bad aim."

Jan left him beside a good fire, and turned into the southwest to burn Langlois and his cabin. The red flag still floated where he had seen it weeks before. The windows were thicker with frost. He shouted, beat upon the door with the butt of his rifle and broke in the windows. The silence of death quickened the beating of his heart when he stopped to listen. There was no doubt that Langlois lay dead in his little home.

Jan brought dry brushwood from the forest, and piled it high against the logs. Upon his sledge he sat and watched the fire until the cabin was a furnace of leaping flame.

He continued westward. At the head of the Porcupine he found the remains of three burned wigwams, and from one of them he dug out charred bones. Down the Porcupine he went slowly, doubling to the east and west, until, at its junction with Gray Otter Creek, he met a Cree, who told him that twenty miles farther on there was an abandoned village of six teepees. Toward these he boldly set forth, praying as he went that the angels were guarding Mélisse at Post Lac Bain.

Croisset reached the post forty-eight hours after he had encountered Jan.

"The red flag is everywhere!" he cried, catching sight of the signal over Mukee's cabin. "It is to the east and west of the Hasabala as thick as jays in springtime!"

The Cree from the Gray Otter drove in on his way north.

"Six wigwams with dead in them," he reported in his own language to Williams. "A company man, with a one-eyed leader and four trailers, left the Gray Otter to burn them."

Williams took down his birch-bark moose-horn

and bellowed a weird signal to Cummins, who opened a crack of his door to listen, with Mélisse close beside him.

"Thoreau is in the thick of it to the south," he called. "There's too much of it for him, and I'm going down with the dogs. Croisset will stay in the store for a few days."

Mélisse heard the words, and her eyes were big with fear when her father turned from closing and bolting the door. In more than a childish way, she knew that Jan had gone forth to face a great danger. The grim laws of the savage world in which she lived had already begun to fix their influence upon her, quickening her instinct and reason, just as they hastened the lives of Indian children into the responsibilities of men and women before they had reached fifteen.

She knew what the red flag over Mukee's cabin meant. She knew that the air of this world of hers had become filled with peril to those who breathed it, and that people were dying out in the forests; that all about them there was a terrible, unseen thing which her father called the plague, and that Jan had

gone forth to fight it, to breathe it, and, perhaps, to die in it. Their own door was locked and bolted against it. She dared not even thrust her head from the window which was opened for a short time each day; and until Cummins assured her that there was no danger in the sunshine, she shunned the few pale rays that shot through the cabin-window at midday.

Unconsciously, Cummins added to her fears in more ways than one, and as he answered her questions truthfully, her knowledge increased day by day. She thought more and more of Jan. She watched for him through the two windows of her home. Every sound from outside brought her to them with eager hope; and always her heart sank with disappointment, and the tears would come very near to her eyes, when she saw nothing but the terrible red flag clinging to the pole over Mukee's cabin.

In the little Bible which her mother had left there was written, on the ragged fly-leaf, a simple prayer. Each night, as she knelt beside her cot and repeated this prayer, she paused at the end, and added:

"Dear Father in Heaven, please take care of Jan!"

The days brought quick changes now. One morning the moose-horn called Cummins to the door. It was the fifth day after Williams had gone south.

"There was no smoke this morning, and I looked through the window," shouted Croisset. "Mukee and the old man are both dead. I'm going to burn the cabin."

A stifled groan of anguish fell from Cummins' lips as he went like a dazed man to his cot and flung himself face downward upon it. Mélisse could see his strong frame shaking, as if he were crying like a child; and twining her arms tightly about his neck, she sobbed out her passionate grief against his rough cheek. She did not know the part that Mukee had played in the life of the sweet woman who had once lived in this same little cabin; she knew only that he was dead; that the terrible thing had killed him, and that, next to her father and Jan, she had loved him more than any one else in the world.

Soon she heard a strange sound, and ran to the window. Mukee's cabin was in flames. Wild-eyed and tearless with horror, she watched the fire as it burst through the broken windows and leaped high

up among the black spruce. In those flames was Mukee! She screamed, and her father sprang to her with a strange cry, running with her from the window into the little room where she slept.

The next morning, when Cummins went to awaken her, his face went as white as death. Mélisse was not asleep. Her eyes were wide open and staring at him, and her soft cheeks burned with the hot glow of fire.

"You are sick, Mélisse," he whispered hoarsely. "You are sick!"

He fell upon his knees beside her, and lifted her face in his hands. The touch of it sent a chill to his heart—such as he had not felt since many years ago, in that other room a few steps away.

"I want Jan," she pleaded. "I want Jan to come back to me!"

"I will send for him, dear. He will come back soon. I will go out and send Croisset."

He hid his face from her as he dragged himself away. Croisset saw him coming, and came out of the store to meet him. A hundred yards away Cummins stopped.

"Croisset, for the love of God, take a team and go after Jan Thoreau," he called. "Tell him that Mélisse is dying of the plague. Hurry, hurry!"

"Night and day!" shouted Croisset.

Twenty minutes later, from the cabin window, Cummins saw him start.

"Jan will be here very soon, Mélisse," he said, running his fingers gently through her hair.

It fell out upon the pillow in thick brown waves, and the sight of it choked him with the memory of another vision which would remain with him until the end of time. It was her mother's hair, shining softly in the dim light; her mother's eyes looked up at him as he sat beside her through all this long day.

Toward evening there came a change. The fever left the child's cheeks. Her eyes closed, and she fell asleep. Through the night Cummins sat near the door, but in the gray dawn, overcome by his long vigil, his head dropped upon his breast, and he slumbered.

When he awoke the cabin was filled with light. He heard a sound, and, startled, sprang to his feet. Mélisse was at the stove building a fire!

"I'm better this morning, father. Why didn't you sleep until breakfast was ready?"

Cummins stared. Then he gave a shout, made a rush for her, and catching her up in his arms, danced about the cabin like a great bear, overturning the chairs, and allowing the room to fill with smoke in his wild joy.

"It's what you saw through the window that made you sick, Mélisse," he cried, putting her down at last. "I thought—" He paused, and added, his voice trembling: "I thought you were going to be sick for more than one day, my sweet little woman!"

He opened one of the windows to let in the fresh air of the morning.

When Croisset returned, he did not find a red flag over Cummins' cabin; nor did he bring word of Jan. For three days he had followed the trails to the south without finding the boy. But he brought back other news. Williams was sick with the plague in a Cree wigwam on the lower Porcupine. It was the last they ever heard of the factor, except that he died some time in March, and was burned by the Crees.

Croisset went back over the Churchill trail, and found his wife ready to greet him with open arms. After that he joined Per-ee, who came in from the north, in another search for Jan. They found neither trace nor word of him after passing the Gray Otter, and Cummins gave up hope.

It was not for long that their fears could be kept from Mélisse. This first bitter grief that had come into her life fell upon her with a force which alarmed Cummins, and cast him into deep gloom. She no longer loved to play with her things in the cabin. For days at a time she would not touch the books which Jan had brought from Churchill, and which he had taught her to read. She found little to interest her in the things which had been her life a few weeks before.

With growing despair, Cummins saw his own efforts fail. As the days passed Mélisse mingled more and more with the Indian and half-breed children, and spent much of her time at the company's store, listening to the talk of the men, silent, attentive, unresponsive to any efforts they might make to engage her smiles. From her own heart

she looked out upon a world that had become a void for her. Jan had been mother, brother, and everything that was tender and sweet to her—and he was gone. Mukee, whom she had loved, was gone. Williams was gone. The world was changed, terribly and suddenly, and it added years to her perspective of things.

Each day, as the weeks went on, and the spring sun began to soften the snow, she became a little more like the wild children at Lac Bain and in the forest. For Jan, she had kept her hair soft and bright, because he praised her for it and told her it was pretty. Now it hung in tangles down her back.

There came a night when she forgot her prayer, and Cummins did not notice it. He failed to notice it the next night, and the next. Plunged deep in his own gloom, he was unobservant of many other things, so that, in place of laughter and joy and merry rompings, only gloomy and oppressive shadows of things that had come and gone filled the life of the little cabin.

They were eating dinner, one day in the early spring, with the sunshine flooding in upon them,

when a quick, low footfall caused Mélisse to lift her eyes in the direction of the open door. A strange figure stood there, with bloodless face, staring eyes, and garments hanging in tatters—but its arms were stretched out, as those same arms had been held out to her a thousand times before, and, with the old glad cry, Mélisse darted with the swiftness of a sun-shadow beyond Cummins, crying:

"Jan, Jan—my Jan!"

Words choked in Cummins' throat when he saw the white-faced figure clutching Mélisse to its breast.

At last he gasped "Jan!" and threw out his arms, so that both were caught in their embrace.

For an instant Jan turned his face up to the light. The other stared and understood.

"You have been sick," he said, "but it has left no marks."

"Thank God!" breathed Jan.

Mélisse raised her head, and stroked his cheeks with her two hands. That night she remembered her prayer, and at its end she added:

"Dear Father in Heaven, thank you for sending back Jan!"

CHAPTER XV

ALMOST A WOMAN

PEACE followed in the blighted trails of the Red Terror. Again the forest world breathed without fear; but from Hudson's Bay to Athabasca, and as far south as the thousand waters of the Reindeer country, the winds whispered of a terrible grief that would remain until babes were men and men went to their graves.

Life had been torn and broken in a cataclysm more fearful than that which levels cities and disrupts the earth. Slowly it began its readjustment. There was no other life to give aid or sympathy; and just as they had suffered alone, so now the forest people struggled back into life alone, building up from the wreck of what had been, the things that were to be.

For months the Crees wailed their death dirges as they sought out the bones of their dead. Men

dragged themselves into the posts, wifeless and childless, leaving deep in the wilderness all that they had known to love and give them comfort. Now and then came a woman, and around the black scars of burned cabins and teepees dogs howled mournfully for masters that were gone.

The plague had taken a thousand souls, and yet the laughing, dancing millions in that other big world beyond the edge of the wilderness caught only a passing rumor of what had happened.

Lac Bain suffered least of the far northern posts, with the exception of Churchill, where the icy winds down-pouring from the Arctic had sent the Red Terror shivering to the westward. In the late snows, word came that Cummins was to take Williams' place as factor, and Per-ee at once set off for the Fond du Lac to bring back Jean de Gravois as "chief man." Croisset gave up his fox-hunting to fill Mukee's place.

The changes brought new happiness to Mélisse. Croisset's wife was a good woman who had spent her girlhood in Montreal, and Iowaka, now the mother of a fire-eating little Jean and a handsome

daughter, was a soft-voiced young Venus who had grown sweeter and prettier with her years—which is not usually the case with half-breed women.

"But it's good blood in her, beautiful blood," vaunted Jean proudly, whenever the opportunity came. "Her mother was a princess, and her father a pure Frenchman, whose father's father was a *chef de bataillon.* What better than that, eh? I say, what better could there be than that?"

So, for the first time in her life, Mélisse discovered the joys of companionship with those of her own kind.

This new companionship, pleasant as it was, did not come between her and Jan. If anything, they were more to each other than ever. The terrible months through which they had passed had changed them both, and had given them, according to their years, the fruits which are often ripened in the black gloom of disaster rather than in the sunshine of prosperity.

To Mélisse they had opened up a new world of thought, a new vision of the things that existed about her. The sternest teacher of all had brought

to her the knowledge that comes of grief, of terror, and of death, and she had passed beyond her years, just as the cumulative processes of generations made the Indian children pass beyond theirs.

She no longer looked upon Jan as a mere playmate, a being whose diversion was to amuse and to love her. He had become a man. In her eyes he was a hero, who had gone forth to fight the death of which she still heard word and whisper all about her. Croisset's wife and Iowaka told her that he had done the bravest thing that a man might do on earth. She spoke proudly of him to the Indian children, who called him the "torch-bearer." She noticed that he was as tall as Croisset, and taller by half a head than Jean, and that he lifted her now with one arm as easily as if she were no heavier than a stick of wood.

Together they resumed their studies, devoting hours to them each day, and through all that summer he taught her to play upon his violin. The warm months were a time of idleness at Lac Bain, and Jan made the most of them in his teaching of Mélisse. She learned to read the books which he had

used at Fort Churchill, and by midsummer she could read those which he had used at York Factory. At night they wrote letters to each other and delivered them across the table in the cabin, while Cummins looked on and smoked, laughing happily at what they read aloud to him.

One night, late enough in the season for a fire to be crackling merrily in the stove, Jan was reading one of these letters, when Mélisse cried:

"Stop, Jan—stop *there!*"

Jan caught himself, and he blushed mightily when he read the next lines:

" 'I think you have beautiful eyes. I love them.' "

"What is it?" cried Cummins interestedly. "Read on, Jan."

"Don't!" commanded Mélisse, springing to her feet and running around the table. "I didn't mean you to read that!"

She snatched the paper from Jan's hand and threw it into the fire.

Jan's blood filled with pleasure, and at the bottom of his next letter he wrote back:

"I think you have beautiful hair. I love it."

That winter Jan was appointed post hunter, and this gave him much time at home, for meat was plentiful along the edge of the barrens. The two continued at their books until they came to the end of what Jan knew in them. After that, like searchers in strange places, they felt their way onward, slowly and with caution. During the next summer they labored through all the books which were in the little box in the corner of the cabin.

It was Mélisse who now played most on the violin, and Jan listened, his eyes glowing proudly as he saw how cleverly her little fingers danced over the strings, his face flushed with a joy that was growing stronger in him every day. One day she looked curiously into the F-hole of the instrument, and her pretty mouth puckered itself into a round, red "O" of astonishment when Jan quickly snatched the violin from her hands.

"Excusez-moi, ma belle Mélisse," he laughed at her in French. "I am going to play you something new!"

That same day he took the little cloth-covered roll from the violin and gave it another hiding-place.

It recalled to him the strange spirit which had once moved him at Fort Churchill, and which had remained with him for a time at Lac Bain. That spirit was now gone, luring him no longer. Time had drawn a softening veil over things that had passed. He was happy.

The wilderness became more beautiful to him as Mélisse grew older. Each summer increased his happiness; each succeeding winter made it larger and more complete. Every fiber of his being sang in joyful response as he watched Mélisse pass from childhood into young girlhood. He marked every turn in her development, the slightest change in her transformation, as if she had been a beautiful flower.

He possessed none of the quick impetuosity of Jean de Gravois. Years gave the silence of the North to his tongue, and his exultation was quiet and deep in his own heart. With an eagerness which no one guessed he watched the growing beauty of her hair, marked its brightening luster when he saw it falling in thick waves over her shoulders, and he knew that at last it had come to be like the woman's. The changing lights in her eyes fascinated him, and

he rejoiced again when he saw that they were deepening into the violet blue of the bakneesh flowers that bloomed on the tops of the ridges.

To him, Mélisse was growing into everything that was beautiful. She was his world, his life, and at Post Lac Bain there was nothing to come between the two. Jan noticed that in her thirteenth year she could barely stand under his outstretched arm. The next year she had grown so tall that she could not stand there at all. Very soon she would be a woman!

The thought leaped from his heart, and he spoke it aloud. It was on the girl's fifteenth birthday. They had come up to the top of the ridge on which he had fought the missionary, to gather red sprigs of the bakneesh for the festival that they were to have in the cabin that night. High up on the face of a jagged rock, Jan saw a bit of the crimson vine thrusting itself out into the sun, and, with Mélisse laughing and encouraging him from below, he climbed up until he had secured it. He tossed it down to her.

"It's the last one," she cried, seeing his disad-

vantage, "and I'm going home. You can't catch me!"

She darted away swiftly along the snow-covered ridge, taunting him with merry laughter as she left him clambering in cautious descent down the rock. Jan followed in pursuit, shouting to her in French, in Cree, and in English, and their two voices echoed happily in their wild frolic.

Jan slackened his steps. It was a joy to see Mélisse springing from rock to rock and darting across the thin openings close ahead of him, her hair loosening and sweeping out in the sun, her slender figure fleeing with the lightness of the pale sun-shadows that ran up and down the mountain.

He would not have overtaken her of his own choosing, but at the foot of the ridge Mélisse gave up. She returned toward him, panting and laughing, shimmering like a sea-naiad under the glistening veil of her disheveled hair. Her face glowed with excitement; her eyes, filled with the light of the sun, dazzled Jan in their laughing defiance. Before her he stopped, and made no effort to catch her. Never had he seen her so beautiful, still daring him

with her laugh, quivering and panting, flinging back her hair. Half reaching out his arms, he cried:

"Mélisse, you are beautiful—you are almost a woman!"

The flush deepened in her cheeks, and there was no longer the sweet, taunting mischief in her eyes. She made no effort to run from him when he came to her.

"Do you think so, Brother Jan?"

"If you did your hair up like the pictures we have in the books, you would be a woman," he answered softly. "You are more beautiful than the pictures!"

He drew a step back, and her eyes flashed at him again with the sparkle of the old fun in them.

"You say that I am pretty, and that I am almost a woman," she pouted. "And yet—" She shrugged her shoulders at him in mock disdain. "Jan Thoreau, this is the third time in the last week that you have not played the game right! I won't play with you any more!"

In a flash he was at her side, her face between his two hands, and, bending down, he kissed her upon the mouth.

"There," she said, as he released her. "Isn't that the way we have played it ever since I can remember? Whenever you catch me, you may have that!"

"I am afraid, Mélisse," he said seriously. "You are growing so tall and so pretty that I am afraid."

"Afraid! My brother afraid to kiss me! And what will you do when I get to be a woman, Jan—which will be very soon, you say?"

"I don't know, Mélisse."

She turned her back to him and flung out her hair; and Jan, who had done this same thing for her a hundred times before, divided the silken mass into three strands and plaited them into a braid.

"I don't believe that you care for me as much as you used to, Jan. I wish I were a woman, so that I might know if you are going to forget me entirely!"

Her shoulders trembled; and when he had finished his task, he found that she was laughing, and that her eyes were swimming with a new mischief which she was trying to hide from him. In that laugh there was something which was not like Mélisse. Slight as the change was, he noticed it; but instead

of displeasing him, it set a vague sensation of pleasure trilling like a new song within him.

When they reached the post, Mélisse went to the cabin with her bakneesh, and Jan to the company's store. Tossing the vines upon the table, Mélisse ran back to the door and watched him until he disappeared. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips half parted in excitement; and no sooner had he gone from view than she hurried to Iowaka's home across the clearing.

It was fully three quarters of an hour later when Jan saw Mélisse, with Iowaka's red shawl over her head, walking slowly and with extreme precision of step back to the cabin.

"I wonder if she has the earache," he said to himself, watching her curiously. "That is Iowaka's shawl, and she has it all about her head."

"A clear half-inch of the rarest wool from London," added the cheery voice of Jean de Gravois, whose moccasins had made no sound behind him. He always spoke in French to Jan. "There is but one person in the world who looks better in it than your Mélisse, Jan Thoreau, and that is Iowaka, my

wife. Blessed saints, man, but is she not growing more beautiful every day?"

"Yes," said Jan. "She will soon be a woman."

"A woman!" shouted Jean, who, not having his caribou whip, jumped up and down to emphasize his words. "She will soon be a woman, did you say, Jan Thoreau? And if she is not a woman at thirty, with two children—God send others like them!—when will she be, I ask you?"

"I meant Mélisse," laughed Jan.

"And I meant Iowaka," said Jean. "Ah, there she is now, come out to see if her Jean de Gravois is on his way home with the sugar for which she sent him something like an hour ago; for you know she is *chef de cuisine* of this affair to-night. Ah, she sees me not, and she turns back heartily disappointed, I'll swear by all the saints in the calendar! Did you ever see a figure like that, Jan Thoreau? And did you ever see hair that shines so, like the top-feathers of a raven who's nibbling at himself in the hottest bit of sunshine he can find? Deliver us, but I'll go with the sugar this minute!"

The happy Jean hopped out, like a cricket over-

burdened with life, calling loudly to his wife, who came to meet him.

A few minutes later Jan thrust his head in at their door, as he was passing.

"I knew I should get a beating, or something worse, for forgetting that sugar," cried the little Frenchman, holding up his bared arms. "Dough—dough—dough—I'm rolling dough—dough for the bread, dough for the cakes, dough for the pies—dough, Jan Thoreau, just common flour and water mixed and swabbed—I, Jean de Gravois, chief man at Post Lac Bain, am mixing dough! She is as beautiful as an angel and sweeter than sugar—my Iowaka, I mean; but there is more flesh in her earthly tabernacle than in mine, so I am compelled to mix this dough, *mon ami.* Iowaka, my dear, tell Jan what you were telling me, about Mélisse and—"

"Hush!" cried Iowaka in her sweet Cree. "That is for Jan to find out for himself."

"So—so it is," exclaimed the irrepressible Jean, plunging himself to the elbows in his pan of dough. "Then hurry to the cabin, Jan, and see what sort of a birthday gift Mélisse has got for you."

CHAPTER XVI

BIRTHDAYS

THE big room was empty when Jan came quietly through the open door. He stopped to listen, and caught a faint laugh from the other room, and then another; and to give warning of his presence, he coughed loudly and scraped a chair along the floor. A moment's silence followed. The farther door opened a little, and then it opened wide, and Mélisse came out.

"Now what do you think of me, brother Jan?"

She stood in the light of the window through which came the afternoon sun, her hair piled in glistening coils upon the crown of her head, as they had seen them in the pictures, her cheeks flushed, her eyes glowing questioningly at Jan.

"Do I look—as you thought—I would, Jan?" she persisted, a little doubtful at his silence. She turned,

so that he saw the cluster of soft curls that fell upon her shoulder, with sprigs of bakneesh half smothered in them. "Do I?"

"You are prettier than I have ever seen you, Mélisse," he replied softly.

There was a seriousness in his voice that made her come to him in her old impulsive, half-childish way. She lifted her hands and rested them on his shoulders, as she had always done when inviting him to toss her above his head.

"If I am prettier—and you like me this way—why don't you—"

She finished with a sweet, upturned pouting of her mouth, and, with a sudden, laughing cry, Jan caught her in his arms and kissed the lips she held up to him. It was but an instant, and he freed her, a hot blush burning in his brown cheeks.

"My dear brother!" she laughed at him, gathering up the bakneesh on the table. "I love to have you kiss me, and now I have to make you do it. Father kisses me every morning when he goes to the store. I remember when you used to kiss me every time you came home, but now you forget to do it

at all. Do brothers love their sisters less as they grow older?"

"Sometimes they love the *sister* less and the *other girl* more, *ma belle Mélisse,*" came a quick voice from the door, and Jean de Gravois bounded in like a playful cat, scraping and bowing before Mélisse until his head nearly touched the floor. "Lovely saints, Jan Thoreau, but she *is* a woman, just as my Iowaka told me! And the cakes—the bread—the pies! You must delay the supper my lady, for the good Lord deliver me if I haven't spilled all the dough on the floor! Swas-s-s-s-h—such a mess! And my Iowaka did nothing but laugh and call me a clumsy dear!"

"You're terribly in love, Jean," cried Mélisse, laughing until her eyes were wet; "just like some of the people in the books which Jan and I read."

"And I always shall be, my dear, so long as the daughter of a princess and the great-granddaughter of a *chef de bataillon* allows me to mix her dough!"

Mélisse flung the red shawl over her head, still laughing.

"I will go and help her, Jean."

"Mon Dieu!" gasped Gravois, looking searchingly at Jan, when she had left. "Shall I give you my best wishes, Jan Thoreau? Does it signify?"

"Signify—what?"

The little Frenchman's eyes snapped.

"Why, when our pretty Cree maiden becomes engaged, she puts up her hair for the first time, that is all, my dear Jan. When I asked my blessed Iowaka to be my wife, she answered by running away from me, taunting me until I thought my heart had shriveled into a bit of salt blubber; but she came back to me before I had completely died, with her braids done up on the top of her head!"

He stopped suddenly, startled into silence by the strange look that had come into the other's face. For a full minute Jan stood as if the power of movement had gone from him. He was staring over the Frenchman's head, a ghastly pallor growing in his cheeks.

"No—it—means—nothing," he said finally, speaking as if the words were forced from him one by one.

He dropped into a chair beside the table like one

whose senses had been dulled by an unexpected blow. With a great sighing breath that was almost a sob, he bowed his head upon his arms.

"Jan Thoreau," whispered Jean softly, "have you forgotten that it was I who killed the missioner for you, and that through all of these years Jean de Gravois has never questioned you about the fight on the mountain top?" There was in his voice, as gentle as a woman's, the vibrant note of a comradeship which is next to love—the comradeship of man for man in a world where friendship is neither bought nor sold. "Have you forgotten, Jan Thoreau? If there is anything Jean de Gravois can do?"

He sat down opposite Jan, his thin, eager face propped in his hands, and watched silently until the other lifted his head. Their eyes met, steady, unflinching, and in that look there were the oath and the seal of all that the honor of the big snows held for those two.

Still without words, Jan reached within his breast and drew forth the little roll which he had taken from his violin. One by one he handed the pages over to Jean de Gravois.

"Mon Dieu!" said Jean, when he had finished reading. He spoke no other words. White-faced, the two men stared, Jan's throat twitching, Gravois' brown fingers crushing the rolls he held.

"That was why I tried to kill the missioner," said Jan at last. He pointed to the more coarsely written pages under Jean's hand. "And that—that—is why it could not signify that Mélisse has done up her hair." He rose to his feet, straining to keep his voice even, and gathered up the papers so that they shot back into the little cylinder-shaped roll again. "Now do you understand?"

"I understand," replied Jean in a low voice, but his eyes glittered like dancing dragon-flies as he raised his elbows slowly from the table and stretched his arms above his head. "I understand, Jan Thoreau, and I praise the blessed Virgin that it was Jean de Gravois who killed the missioner out upon the ice of Lac Bain!"

"But the other," persisted Jan, "the other, which says that I—"

"Stop!" cried Jean sharply. He came around the table and seized Jan's hands in the iron grip of his

lithe, brown fingers. "That is something for you to forget. It means nothing—nothing at all, Jan Thoreau! Does any one know but you and me?"

"No one. I intended that some day Mélisse and her father should know; but I waited too long. I waited until I was afraid, until the horror of telling her frightened me. I made myself forget, burying it deeper each year, until to-day—on the mountain—"

"And to-day, in this cabin, you will forget again, and you will bury it so deep that it will never come back. I am proud of you, Jan Thoreau. I love you, and it is the first time that Jean de Gravois has ever said this to a man. Ah, I hear them coming!"

With an absurd bow in the direction of the laughing voices which they now heard, the melodramatic little Frenchman pulled Jan to the door. Half-way across the open were Mélisse and Iowaka, carrying a large Indian basket between them, and making merry over the task. When they saw Gravois and Jan, they set down their burden and waved an invitation for the two men to come to their assistance.

"You should be the second happiest man in the

world, Jan Thoreau," exclaimed Jean. "The first is Jean de Gravois!"

He set off like a bolt from a spring-gun in the direction of the two who were waiting for them. He had hoisted the basket upon his shoulder by the time Jan arrived.

"Are you growing old, too, Jan?" bantered Mélisse, as she dropped a few steps behind Jean and his wife. "You come so slowly!"

"I think I'm twenty-nine."

"You think!" Her dancing eyes shot up to his, bubbling over with the mischief which she had been unable to suppress that day. "Why, Jan—"

He had never spoken to Mélisse as he did now.

"I was born some time in the winter, Mélisse—like you. Perhaps it was yesterday, perhaps it is to-morrow. That is all I know."

He looked at her steadily, the grief which he was fighting to keep back tightening the muscles about his mouth.

Like the quick passing of sunshine, the fun swept from her face, leaving her blue eyes staring up at him, filled with a pain which he had never seen in

them before. In a moment he knew that she had understood him, and he could have cut out his tongue. Her hand reached his arm, and she stopped him, her face lifted pleadingly, the tears slowly gathering in her eyes.

"Forgive me!" she whispered, her voice breaking into a sob. "Dear, dear Jan, forgive me!" She caught one of his hands in both her own, and for an instant held it so that he could feel the throbbing of her heart. "To-day is your birthday, Jan—yours and mine, mine and yours—and we will always have it that way—always—won't we, Jan?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE RENUNCIATION

JAN was glad when the evening came, and was gone. Not until Jean and Iowaka had said good night with Croisset and his wife, and both Cummins and Mélisse had gone to their rooms, did he find himself relieved of the tension under which he had struggled during all of that night's merry-making in the cabin.

From the first he knew that his nerves were strung by some strange and indefinable sensation that was growing within him—something which he could hardly have explained at first, but which swiftly took form and meaning, and oppressed him more as the hours flew by. Almost fiercely he strove to fight back the signs of it from his face and voice. Never had he played as on this night. His violin leaped with life, his voice rose high in the wild forest songs of Jean de Gravois and Croisset, he

sprang aloft in the caribou dance until the tips of his fingers touched the log beams overhead; and yet there was none of the flush of excitement in his face, no joyous fire flashing from his eyes upon Mélisse.

She saw this, and wondered. A dozen times her eyes encountered his, straight and questioning, when the others were not looking. She saw in response only a dull, lusterless glow that was not like the Jan who had pursued her that day on the mountain-top.

Jan was unaware of what was lacking in him. He smiled when she gave him these glances; deep down in him his heart trembled at the beauty of her flushed cheeks, the luster of her coiled hair, the swimming depths of her clear eyes; but the mask of the thing at which she wondered still remained.

After the others had gone, Cummins sat up to smoke a pipe. When he had finished, he went to his room. Jan was now sleeping in a room at the company's store, and after a time he rose silently to take down his cap and coat. He opened the outer door quietly, so as not to arouse Mélisse, who had gone to bed half an hour before.

As he was about to go out, there came a sound—a low, gentle, whispered word.

"Jan!"

He turned. Mélisse stood in her door. She had not undressed, and her hair was still done up in its soft coils, with the crimson bakneesh shining in it. She came to him hesitatingly, until she stood with her two hands upon his arm, gazing into his tense face with that same question in her eyes.

"Jan, you were not pleased with me to-night," she whispered. "Tell me, why?"

"I was pleased with you, Mélisse," he replied.

He took one of the hands that was clinging to his arm, and turned his face to the open night. Countless stars gleamed in the sky, as they had shone on another night fifteen years ago. From where they stood they saw the pale flicker of the aurora, sending its shivering arrows out over the dome of the earth, with the same lonely song that it had played when the woman died. Gaunt and solitary, the tall spruce loomed up against the silver glow, its thick head sighing faintly in the night wind, as

if in wailing answer to that far-away music in the skies.

Suddenly there leaped up from Jan Thoreau's breast a breath that burst from his lips in a low cry.

"Mélisse, Mélisse, it was just fifteen years ago that I came in through that forest out there, starved and dying, and played my violin when your mother died. You were a little baby then, and since that night you have never pleased me more than now!"

He dropped her hand and turned squarely to the door, to hide what he knew had come into his face. He heard a soft, heart-broken little sob behind him, and something fell rustling upon his arm.

"Jan, dear Jan!"

Mélisse crowded herself into his arms, her hair torn down and tumbling about her shoulders. In her eyes there were the old pride and the old love, the love and pride of what seemed to Jan to be, years ago, the old, childish pleading for his comradeship, for the fun of his strong arms, the frolic of his laugh. Irresistibly they called to him, and in the old glad way he tightened his arms about her shoul-

ders, his eyes glowing, and life leaping back, flushed and full, into his face.

She laughed, happy and trembling, her lips held up to him.

"I didn't please you to-day," she whispered. "I will never do up my hair again!"

He kissed her, and his arms dropped from her shoulders.

"Never, never again—until you have forgotten to love me," she repeated. "Good night, Brother Jan!"

Across the open, through the thinned edge of the black spruce, deeper and deeper into the cold, unquivering lifelessness of the forest, Jan went from the door that closed between him and Mélisse, her last words still whispering in his ears, the warm touch of her hair on his cheeks—and the knowledge of what this day had meant for him swiftly surging upon him, bringing with it a torment which racked him to the soul.

Fifteen years ago! He stopped and looked up, the starlight whitening his face. There was no change in this night from that other one of ages and ages ago. There were the same stars, like fierce

eyes of pale fire, robbed of softness by the polar cold; there were the same cloudless blue space, the same hissing flashes of the aurora leaping through its infinity, the same trees that had listened to his moaning prayers on that night when he had staggered into Lac Bain.

He went on until he came to where the beaten trail swept up and away from a swamp. As vividly as if it had happened but yesterday, he remembered how he had dragged himself through this swamp, bleeding and starving, his violin clutched to his breast, guided by the barking of dogs, which seemed to come from a million miles away. He plunged into it now, picking his tangled way until he stood upon a giant ridge, from which he looked out through the white night into the limitless barrens to the north.

Along the edge of those barrens he had come, daring the hundred deaths between hunter's cabin and Indian wigwam, starving at times, almost dying of cold, building fires to keep the wolves back, and playing—always playing to keep up his courage, until he found Mélisse. Fifteen years had passed

since then, and the cumulative force of the things that had grown out of those years had fallen upon him this day. He had felt it first when Mélisse turned upon him at the foot of the mountain; and after that in the cabin, in every breath he drew, in every look that he gave her. For him she had changed for all time. She was no longer the little Mélisse, his sister. And yet—

He was almost saying her last words aloud:

"Good night, Brother Jan!"

She had come to him that day to let him kiss her, as she had come to him a thousand times before; but he had not kissed her in the old way. It was a different love that his lips had given, and even now the hot blood surged again into his face as he thought of what he had done. His was a different idea of honor from that held by men born to the ways of passion.

In that which had stirred his blood, thrilling him with strange joy as he held her in his arms, he saw more than the shadow of sin—sacrilege against a thing which was more precious to him than life. Mélisse came to him still as his sister, abiding

in her glorious faith in him, unaware of his temptation; while he, Jan Thoreau—

He thrust a hand inside his coat and clutched at the papers that Jean de Gravois had read. Then he drew them forth, slowly, and held them crumpled in his fingers, while for many minutes he stared straight out into the gray gloom of the treeless plain.

His eyes shifted. Searchingly they traveled up the face of the crags behind him. They hunted where the starlight made deep pits of gloom in the twisting edge of the mountains. They went from rock to rock and from tree to tree until at last they rested upon a giant spruce which hung out over the precipitous wall of the ridge, its thick top beckoning and sighing to the black rocks that shot up out of the snow five hundred feet below.

It was a strange tree, weird and black, free of stub or bough for a hundred feet, and from far out on the barrens those who traveled their solitary ways east and west knew that it was a monument shaped by men. Mukee had told Jan its story. In the first autumn of the woman's life at Lac Bain, he

and Per-ee had climbed the old spruce, lopping off its branches until only the black cap remained; and after that it was known far and wide as the "lob-stick" of Cummins' wife. It was a voiceless cenotaph which signified that all the honor and love known to the wilderness people had been given to her.

To it went Jan, the papers still held in his hand. He had seen a pair of whisky-jacks storing food in the butt of the tree, two or three summers before, and now his fingers groped for the hole. When he found it, he thrust in the papers, crowded them down, and filled the hole with chunks of bark.

"Always my sister—and never anything more to Jan Thoreau," he said gently in French, as if he were speaking to a spirit in the old tree. "That is the honor of these snows; it is what the great God means us to be." The strife had gone from his voice; it rose strong and clear as he stretched his arms high up along the shorn side of the spruce, his eyes upon the silent plume that heard his oath. "I swear that Jan Thoreau will never do wrong to the little Mélisse!"

With a face white and set in its determination, he turned slowly away from the tree. Far away, from the lonely depths of the swamp, there came the wailing howl of a wolf—a cry of hungerful savageness that died away in echoes of infinite sadness. It was like the howling of a dog at the door of a cabin in which his master lay dead, and the sound of it swept a flood of loneliness into Jan's heart. It was the death-wail of his own last hope, which had gone out of him for ever that night.

He listened, and it came again; but in the middle of it, when the long, moaning grief of the voice was rising to its full despair, there broke in a sharp interruption—a shrieking, yelping cry, such as a dog makes when it is suddenly struck. In another moment the forest thrilled with the deep-throated pack-call of the wolf who has started a fresh kill. Hardly had its echoes died away when, from deeper in the swamp, there came another cry, and still another from the mountain; and up and out of the desolation rose the calls of others of the scattered pack, in quick response to the comrade who had first found meat.

All the cries were alike, filled with that first wailing grief, except that of the swelling throat which was sending forth the call to food. A few minutes, and another of the mournful howls changed into the fierce hunt-cry; then a second, a third, and a fourth, and the sound of the chase swept swiftly from the swamp to the mountain, up the mountain and down into the barrens.

"A caribou!" cried Jan softly. "A caribou, and he is going into the barrens. There is no water, and he is lost!"

He ran and leaned over beside the old tree, so that the great plain stretched out below him. Into the west turned the pack, the hunt-cry growing fainter until it almost died away. Then, slowly, it grew again in volume, swinging into the north, then to the east—approaching nearer and nearer until Jan saw a dark, swiftly moving blot in the white gloom.

The caribou passed by within half a rifle-shot of him; another half rifle-shot behind followed the wolves, flung out fan-shape, their gray bodies moving like specters in a half-moon cordon, and their

leaders almost abreast the caribou a dozen rods to each side.

There was no sound now. Below him, Jan could see the pale glimmer of ice and snow, where in summer there was a small lake. Desperately the caribou made an effort to reach this lake. The wolves drew in. The moon-shape of their bodies shrunk until it was nearer a circle. From the plain side the leading wolf closed until he was running at the caribou's forelegs. The mountain wolf responded on the opposite side. Then came the end, quick, decisive, and without sound.

After a few moments there came faintly the snapping of jaws and the crunching of bones. Torn and bleeding, and yet quivering with life, the caribou was given up to the feast.

Jan turned away from the scene. Torn and bleeding at his own heart, he went back to Lac Bain.

CHAPTER XVIII

BROTHER JAN

WHEN he came into the cabin for breakfast that morning, Jan's face showed signs of the struggle through which he had gone. Cummins had already finished, and he found Mélisse alone. Her hair was brushed back in its old, smooth way; and when she heard him, she flung her long braid over her shoulder, so that it fell down in front of her. He saw the movement, and smiled his thanks without speaking.

"You don't look well, Jan," she said anxiously. "You are pale, and your eyes are bloodshot."

"I am not feeling right," he admitted, trying to appear cheerful, "but this coffee will make a new man of me. You make the best coffee in the world, Mélisse?"

"How do you know, brother?" she asked. "Have

you drunk any other than mine since years ago at Churchill and York Factory?"

"Only Iowaka's. But I know that yours is best, from what I remember of the coffee at the bay."

"It was a long time ago, wasn't it?" she asked gently, looking at him across the table. "I dreamed of those days last night, Jan, though I don't remember anything about your going to Churchill. I must have been too young; but I remember when you went to Nelson House, and how lonely I was. Last night I dreamed that we both went, and that we stood together, looking out over the bay, where the tides are washing away the guncase coffins. I saw the ship that you described to me, too, and thought that we wanted to go out to it, but couldn't. Do you suppose we'll ever go to Churchill together, Jan, and ride on a wonderful ship like that?"

"It may be, Mélisse."

"And then I dreamed that you were gone, and I was alone; and some one else came to me, whom I didn't like at all, and tried to *make* me go to the ship. Wasn't that strange?" She laughed softly, as she rose to give him another cup of coffee. "What

did you mean, Jan Thoreau, by running away from me like that?"

"To get even with you for running away from me on the mountain," he replied quickly.

She paused, the cup half filled, and Jan, looking up, caught her eyes full of mock astonishment.

"And were you sorry I ran away from you?"

Despite himself, his pale cheeks flushed.

"Do you think I was?" he replied equivocally.

"I—don't—know," she answered slowly, filling his cup. "What are you going to do to-day, Jan?"

"Drive out on the Churchill trail. Ledoq wants supplies, and he's too busy with his trap-lines to come in."

"Will you take me?"

"I'm afraid not, Mélisse. It's a twelve-mile run and a heavy load."

"Very well. I'll get ready immediately."

She jumped up from the table, darting fun at him with her eyes, and ran to her room.

"It's too far, Mélisse," he called after her. "It's too far, and I've a heavy load—"

"Didn't I take that twenty-mile run with you over

to— Oh, dear! Jan, have you seen my new lynx-skin cap?"

"It's out here, hanging on the wall," replied Jan, falling into her humor despite himself. "But I say, Mélisse—"

"Are the dogs ready?" she called. "If they're not, I'll be dressed before you can harness them, Jan."

"They'll be here within fifteen minutes," he replied, surrendering to her.

Her merry face, laughing triumph at him through the partly open door, destroyed the last vestige of his opposition, and he left her with something of his old cheeriness of manner, whistling a gay forest tune as he hurried toward the store.

When he returned with the team, Mélisse was waiting for him, a gray thing of silvery lynx fur, with her cheeks, lips and eyes aglow, her trim little feet clad in soft caribou boots that came to her knees, and with a bunch of the brilliant bakneesh fastened jauntily in her cap.

"I've made room for you," he said in greeting, pointing to the sledge.

"Which I'm not going to fill for five miles, at least," declared Mélisse. "Isn't it a glorious morning, Jan? I feel as if I can run from here to Ledoq's!"

With a crack of his whip and a shout, Jan swung the dogs across the open, with Mélisse running lightly at his side. From their cabin Jean and Iowaka called out shrill adieus.

"The day is not far off when they two will be as you and I, my Iowaka," said Jean in his poetic Cree. "I wager you that it will be before her next birthday!"

And Mélisse was saying:

"I wonder if there are many people as happy as Jean and Iowaka!"

She caught her breath, and Jan cracked on the dogs in a spurt that left her panting, a full dozen rods behind him. With a wild halloo he stopped the team, and waited.

"That's unfair, Jan! You'll have to put me on the sledge."

He tucked her in among the furs, and the dogs strained at their traces, with Jan's whip curling and

snapping over their backs, until they were leaping swiftly and with unbroken rhythm of motion over the smooth trail. Then Jan gathered in his whip and ran close to the leader, his moccasined feet taking the short, quick, light steps of the trained forest runner, his chest thrown a little out, his eyes upon the twisting trail ahead.

It was a glorious ride, and Mélisse's eyes danced with joy. Her blood thrilled to the tireless effort of the grayish-yellow pack of magnificent brutes ahead of her. She watched the muscular play of their backs and legs, the eager outreaching of their wolfish heads, and their half-gaping jaws—and from them she looked to Jan. There was no effort in his running. His pale cheeks were flushed, his black hair swept back from the gray of his cap, gleaming in the sun. Like the dogs, there was music in his movement, there was the beauty of strength, of endurance, of manhood born to the forests. Her eyes shone proudly; the color deepened in her cheeks as she looked at him, wondering if there was another man in the world like Jan Thoreau.

Mile after mile slipped behind, and not until they

reached the mountain on which he had fought the missionary did Jan bring his dogs to a walk. Mélisse jumped from the sledge and ran quickly to his side.

"I can beat you to the top now!" she cried. "If you catch me—" There was the old witching challenge in her eyes.

She sped up the side of the ridge. Panting and breathless, Jan pursued with the dogs. Her advantage was too great for him to overcome this time, and she stood laughing down at him when he came to the top of the ridge.

"You're as pretty as a fairy, Mélisse!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining with admiration. "Prettier than the fairy in the book!"

"Thank you, brother! The one with golden hair?"

"Yes, all of them."

"I can't imagine how a girl would look with golden hair; can you, Jan?" Before he could answer she added mischievously: "Did you see any fairies at Churchill or York Factory?"

"None that could compare with you, Mélisse."

"Thank you again, brother mine! I believe you *do* still love me a little."

"More than ever in my life," replied Jan quickly, though he tried to hold his tongue.

As they went on to Ledoq's, he found that the joyousness of the morning was giving way again to the old gloom and heartache. Brother Jan, Brother Jan, Brother Jan! The words pounded themselves incessantly in his brain until they seemed to keep time with his steps beside the sledge. They drove him back into his thoughts of the preceding night, and he felt a sense of relief when they reached the trapper's.

Ledoq was stripping the hair-fat from a fox-skin when the team pulled up in front of his cabin. When he saw the daughter of the factor at Lac Bain with Jan, he jumped briskly to his feet, flung his cap through the door of the shack, and began bowing and scraping to her with all his might. It was well known in the province of Lac Bain that many years before Jean de Gravois had lost a little brother, who had disappeared one day in the woods; and there were those who hinted that Ledoq was that

brother, for Jean and he were as like as two peas in the ready use of their tongues, and were of the same build and the same briskness.

Mélisse laughed merrily as Ledoq continued to bow before her, rattling away in a delighted torrent of French.

"Ah, thes ees wan gr-r-reat compleeman, M'selle Mélisse," he finished at last, breaking for an instant into English. He straightened like a spring and turned to Jan. "Did you meet the strange team?"

"We met no team."

Ledoq looked puzzled. Half a mile away, the top of a snow-covered ridge was visible from the cabin. He pointed to it.

"An hour ago I saw it going westward along the mountain—three men and six dogs. Whom have you out from Lac Bain?"

"No one," replied Jan. "It must have been the new agent from Churchill. We expect him early this winter. Shall we hurry back, Mélisse, and see if he has brought our books and violin-strings?"

"You must have dinner with me," objected Ledoq.

Jan caught a quick signal from Mélisse.

"Not to-day, Ledoq. It's early, and we have a lunch for the trail. What do you say, Mélisse?"

"If you're not tired, Jan."

"Tired!"

He tossed the last package from the sledge and cracked his long whip over the dogs' backs as they both cried out their farewell to the little Frenchman.

"Tired!" he repeated, running close beside her as the team swung lightly back into the trail, and laughing down into her face. "How could I ever get tired with you watching me run, Mélisse?"

"I wouldn't mind if you did—just a little, Jan. Isn't there room for two?"

She gave a coquettish little shrug of her shoulders, and Jan leaped upon the moving sledge, kneeling close behind her.

"Always, always, I have to ask you!" she pouted. "You needn't get too near, you know, if you don't want to!"

The old, sweet challenge in her voice was irresistible, and for a moment Jan felt himself surrendering to it. He leaned forward until his chin was buried in the silken lynx fur of her coat, and for a single

breath he felt the soft touch of her cheek against his own. Then he gave a sudden shout to the dogs—so loud that it startled her—and his whip writhed and snapped twenty feet above their heads, like a thing filled with life.

He sprang from the sledge and again ran with the team, urging them on faster and faster until they dropped into a panting walk when they came to the ridge along which Ledoq, two hours before, had seen the strangers hurrying toward Lac Bain.

"Stop!" cried Mélisse, taking this first opportunity to scramble from the sledge. "You're cruel to the dogs, Jan! Look at their jaws—see them pant! Jan Thoreau, I've never seen you drive like that since the night we were chased in from the barrens by the wolves!"

"And did you ever see me run any faster?" He struggled, dropping exhausted upon the sledge. "I remember only one other time."

He took a long breath, flinging back his arms to bring greater volume of air into his lungs.

"Wasn't that the night we heard the wolves howling behind us?" Mélisse asked.

"No, it was many years ago, when I heard, far to the south, that my little Mélisse was dying of the plague."

Mélisse sat down upon the sledge beside him without speaking, and nestled one of her hands a little timidly in one of his big, brown palms.

"Tell me about it, Jan."

"That was all—I ran."

"You wouldn't run as fast for me now, would you?"

He looked at her boldly, and saw that there was not half of the brilliant flush in her cheeks.

"I ran for you, just now—and you didn't like it," he replied.

"I don't mean that." She looked up at him, and her fingers tightened round his own. "Away back—years and years and years ago, Jan—you went out to fight the plague, and nearly died in it, for me. Would you do that much again?"

"I would do more, Mélisse."

She looked at him doubtfully, her eyes searching him as if in quest of something in his face which she scarce believed in his words. Slowly he rose to

his feet, lifting her with him; and when he had done this he took her face between his two hands and looked straight into her eyes.

"Some day I will do a great deal more for you than that, Mélisse, and then—"

"What?" she questioned, as he hesitated.

"Then you will know whether I love you as much now as I did years and years and years ago," he finished, gently repeating her words.

There was something in his voice that held Mélisse silent as he turned to straighten out the dogs; but when he came back, making her comfortable on the sledge, she whispered:

"I wish you would do it *soon,* Brother Jan!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE NEW AGENT AND HIS SON

THEY did not lunch on the trail, but drove into the post in time for dinner. Jean de Gravois and Croisset came forth from the store to meet them.

"You have company, my dear!" cried Jean to Mélisse. "Two gentlemen fresh from London on the last boat, and one of them younger and handsomer than your own Jan Thoreau. They are waiting for you in the cabin, where *mon père* is getting them dinner, and telling them how beautifully you would have made the coffee if you were there."

"Two!" said Jan, as Mélisse left them. "Who are they?"

"The new agent, M. Timothy Dixon, as red as the plague, and fatter than a spawning fish! And his son, who has come along for fun, he says; and I believe he will get what he's after if he remains here

very long, Jan Thoreau, for he looked a little too boldly at my Iowaka when she came into the store just now!"

"Mon Dieu!" laughed Jan, as Gravois took in the four quarters of the earth with a terrible gesture. "Can you blame him, Jean? I tell you that I look at Iowaka whenever I get the chance!"

"Is she not worth it?" cried Jean in rapture. "You are welcome to every look that you can get, Jan Thoreau. But the foreigner—I will skin him alive and spit him with devil-thorn if he so much as peeps at her out of the wrong way of his eye!"

Croisset spoke.

"There was once a foreigner who came. You remember?"

"I remember," said Jan.

He looked to the white cross which marked Mukee's grave in the edge of the forest, where the shadow of the big spruce fell across it at the end of summer evenings.

"And—he—died," said Jean de Gravois, his dark hands clenched. "God forgive me, but I hate these red-necked men from across the sea."

Croisset shrugged his shoulders.

"Breeders of two-legged carrion-eaters!" he exclaimed fiercely. *"La charogne!* There are two at Nelson House, and two on the Wholdaia, and one—"

A sharp cry fell from Jan's lips. When Croisset whirled toward him, he stood among his dogs, as white as death, his black eyes blazing as if just beyond him he saw something which filled him with terror.

As the man turned, startled by the look, Jean sprang to his side.

"Saints preserve us, but that was an ugly twist of the hand!" he cried shrilly. "Next time, turn your sledge by the rib instead of the nose, when your dogs are still in the traces!" Under his breath he whispered, as he made pretense of looking at Jan's hand: *"Le diable,* do you want to tell *him?"*

Jan tried to laugh as Croisset came to see what had happened.

"Will you care for the dogs, Henri?" asked Jean. "It's only a trifling sprain of the wrist, which Iowaka can cure with one dose of her liniment."

As they walked away, Jan's face still as pallid as the gray snow under their feet, Gravois added: "You're a fool, Jan Thoreau. There's a crowd at your cabin, and you'll have dinner with me."

"La charogne!" muttered Jan. *"Les bêtes de charogne!"*

Jean gripped him by the arm.

"I tell you that it means nothing—nothing!" he said, repeating his words of the previous day in the cabin. "You are a man. You must fight it down, and forget. No one knows but you and me."

"You will never tell what you read in the papers?" cried Jan quickly. "You swear it?"

"By the blessed Virgin, I swear it!"

"Then," said Jan softly, "Mélisse will never know!"

"Never," said Jean. His dark face flashed joyously as Iowaka's sweet voice came to them, singing a Cree lullaby in the little home. "Some day Mélisse will be singing that same way over there; and it will be for you, Jan Thoreau, as my Iowaka is now singing for me!"

An hour later Jan went slowly across the open to

Cummins' cabin. As he paused for an instant at the door he heard a laugh that was strange to him, and when he opened it to enter he stood perplexed and undecided. Mélisse had risen from the table at the sound of his approach, and his eyes quickly passed from her flushed face to the young man who was sitting opposite her. He caught a nervous tremble in her voice when she said:

"Mr. Dixon, this is my brother, Jan."

The stranger jumped to his feet and held out a hand.

"I'm glad to know you, Cummins."

"Thoreau," corrected Jan quietly, as he took the extended hand. "Jan Thoreau."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought—" He turned inquiringly to Mélisse. The flush deepened in her cheeks as she began to gather up the dishes.

"We are of no relation," continued Jan, something impelling him to speak the words with cool precision. "Only we have lived under the same roof since she was a baby, and so we have come to be like brother and sister."

"Miss Mélisse has been telling me about your

wonderful run this morning," exclaimed the young Englishman, his face reddening slightly as he detected the girl's embarrassment. "I wish I had seen it!"

"There will be plenty of it very soon," replied Jan, caught by the frankness of the other's manner. "Our runners will be going out among the trappers within a fortnight."

"And will they take me?"

"You may go with me, if you can run. I leave the day after to-morrow."

"Thanks," said Dixon, moving toward the door.

Mélisse did not lift her head as he went out. Faintly she said:

"I've kept your dinner for you, Jan. Why didn't you come sooner?"

"I had dinner with Gravois," he replied. "Jean said that you would hardly be prepared for five, Mélisse, so I accepted his invitation."

He took down from the wall a fur sledge-coat, in which Mélisse had mended a rent a day or two before, and, throwing it over his arm, turned to leave.

"Jan!"

He faced her slowly, knowing that in spite of himself there was a strangeness in his manner which she would not understand.

"Why are you going away the day after to-morrow—two weeks before the others? You didn't tell me."

"I'm going a hundred miles into the South," he answered.

"Over the Nelson House trail?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" Her lips curled slightly as she looked at him. Then she laughed, and a bright spot leaped into either cheek. "I understand, brother," she said softly. "Pardon me for questioning you so. I had forgotten that the MacVeigh girl lives on the Nelson trail. Iowaka says that she is as sweet as a wild flower. I wish you would have her come up and visit us some time, Jan."

Jan's face went red, then white, but Mélisse saw only the first effect of her random shot, and was briskly gathering up the dishes.

"I turn off into the Cree Lake country before I reach MacVeighs'." he was on the point of saying;

but the words hung upon his lips, and he remained silent.

A few minutes later he was talking with Jean de Gravois. The little Frenchman's face was ominously dark, and he puffed furiously upon his pipe when Jan told him why he was leaving at once for the South.

"Running away!" he repeated for the tenth time in French, his thin lips curling in a sneer. "I am sorry that I gave you my oath, Jan Thoreau, else I would go myself and tell Mélisse what I read in the papers. Pish! Why can't you forget?"

"I may—some day," said Jan. "That is why I am going into the South two weeks early, and I shall be gone until after the big roast. If I remain here another week, I shall tell Mélisse, and then—"

He shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

"And then—what?"

"I should go away for ever."

Jean snapped his fingers with a low laugh.

"Then remain another week, Jan Thoreau, and if it turns out as you say, I swear I will abandon my two Iowakas and little Jean to the wolves!"

"I am going the day after to-morrow."

The next morning Iowaka complained to Mélisse that Gravois was as surly as a bear.

"A wonderful change has come over him," she said. "He does nothing but shrug his shoulders and say *'Le diable!'* and 'The fool!' Last night I could hardly sleep because of his growling. I wonder what bad spirit has come into my Jean?"

Mélisse was wondering the same of Jan. She saw little of him during the day. At noon, Dixon told her that he had made up his mind not to accompany Thoreau on the trip south.

The following morning, before she was up, Jan had gone. She was deeply hurt. Never before had he left on one of his long trips without spending his last moments with her. She had purposely told her father to entertain the agent and his son at the store that evening, so that Jan might have an opportunity of bidding her good-by alone.

Outside of her thoughts of Jan, the days and evenings that followed were pleasant ones for her. The new agent was as jolly as he was fat, and took an immense liking to Mélisse. Young Dixon was

good-looking and brimming with life, and spent a great deal of his time in her company. For hours at a time she listened to his stories of the wonderful world across the sea. As MacDonald had described that life to Jan at Fort Churchill, so he told of it to Mélisse, filling her with visions of great cities, painting picture after picture, until her imagination was riot with the beauty and the marvel of it all, and she listened, with flaming cheeks and glowing eyes.

One day, a week after Jan had gone, he told her about the women in the world which had come to be a fairy-land to Mélisse.

"They are all beautiful over there?" she asked wonderingly, when he had finished.

"Many of them are beautiful, but none so beautiful as you, Mélisse," he replied, leaning near to her, his eyes shining. "Do you know that you are beautiful?"

His words frightened her so much that she bowed her head to hide the signs of it in her face. Jan had often spoken those same words—a thousand times he had told her that she was beautiful—but there had never been this fluttering of her heart before.

There were few things which Iowaka and she did not hold in secret between them, and a day or two later Mélisse told her friend what Dixon had said. For the first time Iowaka abused the confidence placed in her, and told Jean.

"*Le diable!*" gritted Jean, his face blackening.

He said no more until night, when the children were asleep. Then he drew Iowaka close beside him on a bench near the stove, and asked carelessly:

"*Mon ange,* if one makes an oath to the blessed Virgin, and breaks it, what happens?"

He evaded the startled look in his wife's big black eyes.

"It means that one will be for ever damned unless he confesses to a priest soon after, doesn't it *ma chérie?* And if there is no priest nearer than four hundred miles, it is a dangerous thing to do, is it not? But—" He did not wait for an answer. "If one might have the oath broken, and not do it himself, what then?"

"I don't know," said Iowaka simply, staring at him in amazed questioning.

"Nor do I," said Jean, lighting his pipe. "But there is enough of the devil in Jean de Gravois to make him break a thousand oaths if it was for you, my Iowaka!"

Her eyes glowed upon him softly.

"A maiden's soul leaves her body when she becomes the wife of the man she loves," she whispered tenderly in Cree, resting her dark head on Jean's shoulder. "That is what my people believe, Jean; and if I have given my soul to you, why should I not break oath for you?"

"For me alone, Iowaka?"

"For you alone."

"And not for a friend?"

"For no one else in the world, Jean. You are the only one to whom the god of my people bids me make all sacrifice."

"But you do not believe in that god, Iowaka!"

"Sometimes it is better to believe in the god of my people than in yours," she replied gently. "I believed in him fifteen years ago at Churchill. Do you wish me to take back what I gave to you then?"

With a low cry of happiness Jean crushed his face against her soft cheek.

"Believe in him always, my Iowaka, and Jean de Gravois will cut the throat of any missioner who says you will not go to Paradise! But—this other. You are sure that you would break oath for none but me?"

"And the children. They are a part of you, Jean."

A fierce snarling and barking of dogs brought Gravois to the door. They could hear Croisset's raucous voice and the loud cracking of his big whip.

"I'll be back soon," said Jean, closing the door after him; but instead of approaching Croisset and the fighting dogs he went in the direction of Cummins' cabin. "Devil take an oath!" he growled under his breath. "Neither one God nor the other will let me break it, and Iowaka least of all!" He gritted his teeth as young Dixon's laugh sounded loudly in the cabin. "Two fools!" he went on communing with himself. "Cummins—Jan Thoreau—both fools!"

CHAPTER XX

A KISS AND THE CONSEQUENCES

DURING the week that followed, Jean's little black eyes were never far distant from Cummins' cabin. Without being observed, he watched Mélisse and Dixon, and not even to Iowaka did he give hint of his growing suspicions. Dixon was a man whom most other men liked. There were a fascinating frankness in his voice and manner, strength in his broad shoulders, and a general air of comradeship about him which won all but Jean.

The trap-line runners began leaving the post at the end of the second week, and after this Mélisse and the young Englishman were more together than ever. Dixon showed no inclination to accompany the sledges, and when they were gone he and Mélisse began taking walks in the forest, when the sun was high and warm.

It was on one of these days that Jean had gone

along the edge of the caribou swamp that lay between the barrens and the higher forest. As he stopped to examine a fresh lynx trail that cut across the path beaten down by dog and sledge, he heard the sound of voices ahead of him; and a moment later he recognized them as those of Mélisse and Dixon. His face clouded, and his eyes snapped fire.

"Ah, if I was only Jan Thoreau—a Jan Thoreau with the heart of Jean de Gravois—what a surprise I'd give that foreigner!" he said to himself, leaping quickly from the trail into the thicket.

He peered forth from the bushes, his loyal heart beating a wrathful tattoo when he saw that Dixon dared put his hand on Mélisse's arm. They were coming very slowly, the Englishman bending low over the girl's bowed head, talking to her with strange earnestness. Suddenly he stopped, and before Jean could comprehend what had happened he had bent down and kissed her.

With a low cry, Mélisse tore herself free. For an instant she faced Dixon, who stood laughing into her blazing eyes. Then she turned and ran swiftly down the trail.

A second cry fell from her startled lips when she found herself face to face with Jean de Gravois. The little Frenchman was smiling. His eyes glittered like black diamonds.

"Jean, Jean!" she sobbed, running to him.

"He has insulted you," he said softly, smiling into her white face. "Run along to the post, *ma belle Mélisse.*"

He watched her, half turned from the astonished Englishman, until she disappeared in a twist of the trail a hundred yards away. Then he faced Dixon.

"It is the first time that our Mélisse has ever suffered insult," he said, speaking as coolly as if to a child. "If Jan Thoreau were here, he would kill you. He is gone, and I will kill you in his place!"

He advanced, his white teeth still gleaming in a smile, and not until he launched himself like a cat at Dixon's throat was the Englishman convinced that he meant attack. In a flash Dixon stepped a little to one side, and sent out a crashing blow that caught Jean on the side of the head and sent him flat upon his back in the trail.

Half stunned, Gravois came to his feet. He did

not hear the shrill cry of terror from the twist in the trail. He did not look back to see Mélisse standing there. But Dixon both saw and heard, and he laughed tauntingly over Jean's head as the little Frenchman came toward him again, more cautiously than before.

It was the first time that Jean had ever come into contact with science. He darted in again, in his quick, cat-like way, and received a blow that dazed him. This time he held to his feet.

"Bah, this is like striking a baby!" exclaimed Dixon. "What are you fighting about, Gravois? Is it a crime up here to kiss a pretty girl?"

"I am going to kill you!" said Jean as coolly as before.

There was something terribly calm and decisive in his voice. He was not excited. He was not afraid. His fingers did not go near the long knife in his belt. Slowly the laugh faded from Dixon's face, and tense lines gathered around his mouth as Jean circled about him.

"Come, we don't want trouble like this," he urged. "I'm sorry—if Mélisse didn't like it."

"I am going to kill you!" repeated Jean.

There was an appalling confidence in his eyes. From those eyes Dixon found himself retreating rather than from the man. They followed him, never taking themselves from his face. The fire in them grew deeper. Two dull red spots began to glow in Jean's cheeks, and he laughed softly when he suddenly leaped in so that the Englishman struck at him —and missed.

It was the science of the forest man pitted against that of another world. For sport Jean had played with wounded lynx; his was the quickness of sight, of instinct—without the other's science; the quickness of the great loon that had often played this same game with his rifle-fire, of the sledge-dog whose ripping fangs carried death so quickly that eyes could not follow.

A third and a fourth time he came within striking distance, and escaped. He half drew his knife, and at the movement Dixon sprang back until his shoulders touched the brush. Smilingly Gravois unsheathed the blade and tossed it behind him in the trail. His eyes were like a serpent's in their steadi-

ness, and the muscles of his body were drawn as tight as steel springs, ready to loose themselves when the chance came.

There were tricks in his fighting as well as in the other's, and a dawning of it began to grow upon Dixon. He dropped his arms to his side, inviting Jean within reach. Suddenly the little Frenchman straightened. His glittering eyes shot from the Englishman's face to the brush behind him, and a piercing yell burst from his lips. Involuntarily Dixon started, half turning his face, and before he had come to his guard Gravois flung himself under his arms, striking with the full force of his body against his antagonist's knees.

Together they went down in the trail. There was only one science now—that of the forest man. The lithe, brown fingers, that could have crushed the life of a lynx, fastened themselves around the Englishman's throat, and there came one gasping, quickly throttled cry as they tightened in their neck-breaking grip.

"I will kill you!" said Jean again.

Dixon's arms fell limply to his side. His eyes

bulged from their sockets, his mouth was agape, but Jean did not see. His face was buried on the other's shoulder, the whole life of him in the grip. He would not have raised his head for a full minute longer had there not come a sudden interruption—the terrified voice of Mélisse, the frantic tearing of her hands at his hands.

"He is dead!" she shrieked. "You have killed him, Jean!"

He loosed his fingers and sat up. Mélisse staggered back, clutching with her hands at her breast, her face as white as the snow.

"You have killed him!"

Jean looked into Dixon's eyes.

"He is not dead," he said, rising and going to her side. "Come, *ma chère,* run home to Iowaka. I will not kill him." Her slender form shook with agonized sobs as he led her to the turn in the trail. "Run home to Iowaka," he repeated gently. "I will not kill him, Mélisse."

He went back to Dixon and rubbed snow over the man's face.

"*Mon Dieu,* but it was near to it!" he exclaimed,

as there came a flicker of life into the eyes. "A little more, and he would have been with the missioner!"

He dragged the Englishman to the side of the trail, and set his back to a tree. When he saw that fallen foeman's breath was coming more strongly, he followed slowly after Mélisse.

Unobserved, he went into the store and washed the blood from his face, chuckling with huge satisfaction when he looked at himself in the little glass which hung over the wash-basin.

"Ah, my sweet Iowaka, but would you guess now that Jean de Gravois had received two clouts on the side of the head that almost sent him into the blessed hereafter? I would not have had you see it for all the gold in this world!"

A little later he went to the cabin. Iowaka and the children were at Croisset's, and he sat down to smoke a pipe. Scarce had he begun sending up blue clouds of smoke when the door opened and Mélisse came in.

"Hello, *ma chère,*" he cried gaily, laughing at her with a wave of his pipe.

In an instant she had flung the shawl from her head and was upon her knees at his feet, her white face turned up to him pleadingly, her breath falling upon him in panting, sobbing excitement.

"Jean, Jean!" she whispered, stretching up her hands to his face. "Please tell me that you will never tell Jan—please tell me that you never will, Jean—never, never, never!"

"I will say nothing, Mélisse."

"Never, Jean?"

"Never."

For a sobbing breath she dropped her head upon his knees. Then, suddenly, she drew down his face and kissed him.

"Thank you, Jean, for what you have done!"

"Mon Dieu!" gasped Jean when she had gone. "What if Iowaka had been here then?"

CHAPTER XXI

A BROKEN HEART

THE day following the fight in the forest, Dixon found Jean de Gravois alone, and came up to him.

"Gravois, will you shake hands with me?" he said. "I want to thank you for what you did to me yesterday. I deserved it. I have asked Miss Mélisse to forgive me—and I want to shake hands with you."

Jean was thunderstruck. He had never met this kind of man.

"*Que diantre!*" he ejaculated, when he had come to his senses. "Yes, I will shake hands!"

For several days after this Jean could see that Mélisse made an effort to evade him. She did not visit Iowaka when he was in the cabin. Neither did she and Dixon go again into the forest. The young Englishman spent more of his time at the store; and

just before the trappers began coming in, he went on a three-days' sledge-trip with Croisset.

The change delighted Jean. The first time he met Mélisse after the fight, his eyes flashed pleasure.

"Jan will surely be coming home soon," he greeted her. "What if the birds tell him what happened out there on the trail?"

She flushed scarlet.

"Perhaps the same birds will tell us what has happened down on the Nelson House trail, Jean," she retorted.

"Pouf! Jan Thoreau doesn't give the snap of his small finger for the MacVeigh girl!" Jean replied, warm in defense of his friend.

"She is pretty," laughed Mélisse, "and I have just learned that is why men like to—like them, I mean."

Jean strutted before her like a peacock.

"Am I pretty, Mélisse?"

"No-o-o-o."

"Then why"—he shrugged his shoulders suggestively—"in the cabin—"

"Because you were brave, Jean. I love brave men!"

"You were glad that I pummeled the stranger, then?"

Mélisse did not answer, but he caught a laughing sparkle in the corner of her eye as she left him.

"Come home, Jan Thoreau," he hummed softly, as he went to the store. "Come home, come home, come home, for the little Mélisse has grown into a woman, and is learning to use her eyes!"

Among the first of the trappers to come in with his furs was MacVeigh. He brought word that Jan had gone south, to spend the annual holliday at Nelson House, and Cummings told Mélisse whence the message came. He did not observe the slight change that came into her face, and went on:

"I don't understand this in Jan. He is needed here for the carnival. Did you know that he was going to Nelson House?"

Mélisse shook her head.

"MacVeigh says they have made him an offer to go down there as chief man," continued the factor. "It is strange that he has sent no explanation to me!"

It was a week after the big caribou roast before Jan returned to Lac Bain. Mélisse saw him drive in

from the Churchill trail; but while her heart fluttered excitedly, she steeled herself to meet him with at least an equal show of the calm indifference with which he had left her six weeks before. The coolness of his leave-taking still rankled bitterly in her bosom. He had not kissed her; he had not even passed his last evening with her.

But she was not prepared for the changed Jan Thoreau who came slowly through the cabin door. His hair and beard had grown, covering the smooth cheeks which he had always kept closely shaven. His eyes glowed with dull pleasure as she stood waiting for him, but there was none of the old flash and fire in them. There was a strangeness in his manner, an uneasiness in the shifting of his eyes, which caused the half-defiant flush to fade slowly from her cheeks before either had spoken. She had never known this Jan before, and her fortitude left her as she approached him, wonderingly, silent, her hands reaching out to him.

"Jan!" she said.

Her voice trembled; her lips quivered. There was the old glorious pleading in her eyes, and before it

Jan bowed his unkempt head, and crushed her hands tightly in his own. For a half-minute there was silence, and in that half-minute there came a century between them. At last Jan spoke.

"I'm glad to see you again, Mélisse. It has seemed like a very long time!"

He lifted his eyes. Before them the girl involuntarily shrank back, and Jan freed her hands. In them she saw none of the old love-glow, nothing of their old comradeship. Inscrutable, reflecting no visible emotion, they passed from her to the violin hanging on the wall.

"I have not played in so long," he said, turning from her, "that I believe I have forgotten."

He took down the instrument, and his fingers traveled clumsily over the strings. His teeth gleamed at her from out his half-inch growth of beard, as he said:

"Ah, you must play for me now, Mélisse! It has surely gone from Jan Thoreau."

He held out the violin to her.

"Not now, Jan," she said tremulously. "I will play for you to-night." She went to the door of her

room, hesitating for a moment, with her back to him. "You will come to supper, Jan?"

"Surely, Mélisse, if you are prepared."

He hung up the violin as she closed the door, and went from the cabin. Jean de Gravois and Iowaka were watching for him, and Jean hurried across the open to meet him.

"I am coming to offer you the loan of my razor," he cried gaily. "Iowaka says that you will be taken for a bear if the trappers see you."

"A beard is good to keep off the black flies," replied Jan. "It is approaching summer, and the black flies love to feast upon me. Let us go down the trail, Jean. I want to speak with you."

Where there had been wood-cutting in the deep spruce they sat down, facing each other. Jan spoke in French.

"I have traveled far since leaving Lac Bain," he said. "I went first to Nelson House, and from here to the Wholdaia. I found them at Nelson House, but not on the Wholdaia."

"What?" asked Jean, though he knew well what the other meant.

"My brothers, Jean de Gravois," answered Jan, drawing his lips until his teeth gleamed in a sneering smile. "My brothers, *les bêtes de charogne!*"

"Devil take Croisset for telling you where they were!" muttered Jean under his breath.

"I saw the two at Nelson House," continued Jan. "One of them is a half-wit, and the other"—he hunched his shoulders—"is worse. Petraud, one of the two who were at Wholdaia, was killed by a Cree father last winter for dishonoring his daughter. The other disappeared."

Jean was silent, his head leaning forward, his face resting in his hands.

"So you see, Jean de Gravois, what sort of creature is your friend Jan Thoreau!"

Jean raised his head until his eyes were on a level with those of his companion.

"I see that you are a bigger fool than ever," he said quietly. "Jan Thoreau, what if I should break my oath—and tell Mélisse?"

Unflinching the men's eyes met. A dull glare came into Jan's. Slowly he unsheathed his long knife, and placed it upon the snow between his feet,

with the gleaming end of the blade pointing toward Gravois. With a low cry Jean sprang to his feet.

"Do you mean that, Jan Thoreau? Do you mean to give the knife-challenge to one who has staked his life for you and who loves you as a brother?"

"Yes," said Jan deliberately. "I love you, Jean more than any other man in the world; and yet I will kill you if you betray me to Mélisse!" He rose to his feet and stretched out his hands to the little Frenchman. "Jean, wouldn't you do as I am doing? Wouldn't you have done as much for Iowaka?"

For a moment Gravois was silent.

"I would not have taken her love without telling her," he said then. "That is not what you and I know as honor, Jan Thoreau. But I would have gone to her, as you should now go to Mélisse, and she would have opened her arms to me, as Mélisse would opens hers to you. That is what I would have done."

"And that is what I shall never do," said Jan decisively, turning toward the post. "I could kill myself more easily. That is what I wanted to tell you, Jean. No one but you and I must ever know!"

"I would like to choke that fool of a Croisset for sending you to hunt up those people at Nelson House and Wholdaia!" grumbled Jean.

"It was best for me."

They saw Mélisse leaving Iowaka's home when they came from the forest. Both waved their hands to her, and Jan cut across the open to the store.

Jean went to the Cummins cabin as soon as he was sure that he was not observed. There was little of the old vivacity in his manner as he greeted Mélisse. He noted, too, that the girl was not her natural self. There was a redness under her eyes which told him that she had been crying.

"Mélisse," he said at last, speaking to her with his eyes fixed on the cap he was twisting in his fingers, "there has come a great change over Jan."

"A very great change, Jean. If I were to guess, I should say that his heart has been broken down on the Nelson trail."

Gravois caught the sharp meaning in her voice, which trembled a little as she spoke. He was before her in an instant, his cap fallen to the floor, his eyes blazing as he caught her by the arms.

"Yes, the heart of Jan Thoreau is broken!" he cried. "But it has been broken by nothing that lives on the Nelson House trail. It is broken because of —*you!*"

"I!" Mélisse drew back from him with a breathless cry. "I—I have broken—"

"I did not say that," interrupted Jean. "I say that it is broken because of you. *Mon Dieu,* if only I might tell you!"

"Do—*do,* Jean! Please tell me!" She put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes implored him. "Tell me what I have done—what I can do, Jean!"

"I can say that much to you, and no more," he said quietly. "Only know this, *ma chère*—that there is a great grief eating at the soul of Jan Thoreau, and that because of this grief he is changed. I know what this grief is, but I am pledged never to reveal it. It is for you to find out, and to do this, above all else—let him know that you love him!"

The color had faded from her startled face, but now it came back again in a swift flood.

"That I love him?"

"Yes. Not as a sister any longer, Mélisse, but as a *woman!*"

CHAPTER XXII

HER PROMISE

GRAVOIS did not stay to see the effect of his last words. Only he knew, as he went through the door, that her eyes were following him, and that if he looked at her she would call him back. So he shut the door quickly behind him, fearing that he had already said too much.

Cummins and Jan came in together at supper-time. The factor was in high humor. An Indian from the Porcupine had brought in two silver fox that morning, and he was immensely pleased at Jan's return—a combination of incidents which put him in the best of moods.

Mélisse sat opposite Jan at the table. She had twisted a sprig of red bakneesh into her glossy braid, and a cluster of it nestled at her throat, but Jan gave no sign that he had noticed this little favor,

which was meant entirely for him. He smiled at her, but there was a clear coolness in the depths of his dark eyes which checked any of the old familiarity on her part.

"Has MacVeigh put in his new trap-line?" Cummins inquired, after asking Jan many questions about his trip.

"I don't know," replied Jan. "I didn't go to MacVeighs'."

Purposely he held his eyes from Mélisse. She understood his effort, and a quick flush gathered in her cheeks.

"It was MacVeigh who brought in word of you," persisted the factor, oblivious of the effect of his questions.

"I met him in the Cree Lake country, but he said nothing of his trap-lines."

He rose from the table with Cummins, and started to follow him from the cabin. Mélisse came between. For a moment her hand rested upon his arm.

"You are going to stay with me, Jan," she smiled. "I want your help with the dishes, and then we're going to play on the violin."

She pulled him into a chair as Cummins left, and tied an apron about his shoulders.

"Close your eyes—and don't move!" she commanded, laughing into his surprised face as she ran into her room.

A moment later she returned with one hand held behind her back. The hot blood surged through Jan's veins when he felt her fingers running gently through his long hair. There came the snip of scissors, a little nervous laugh close to his head, and then again the snip, snip, snip of the scissors.

"It's terribly long, Jan!" Her soft hand brushed his bearded cheek. "Ugh!" she shuddered. "You must take that off your face. If you don't—"

"Why?" he asked, through lack of anything else to say.

She lowered her head until her cheek pressed against his own.

"Because it feels like bristles," she whispered.

She reddened fiercely when he remained silent, and the scissors snipped more rapidly between her fingers.

"I'm going to prospect the big swamp along the

edge of the Barrens this summer," he explained soon, laughing to relieve the tension. "A beard will protect me from the black flies."

"You can grow another."

She took the apron from about his shoulders, and held it so that he could see the result of her work. He looked up, smiling.

"Thank you, Mélisse. Do you remember when you last cut my hair?"

"Yes—it was over on the mountain. We had taken the scissors along for cutting bakneesh, and you looked so like a wild Indian that I made you sit on a rock and let me trim it."

"And you cut my ear," he reminded.

"For which you made me pay," she retorted quickly, almost under her breath.

She went to the cupboard behind the stove, and brought out her father's shaving-mug and razor.

"I insist that you shall use them," she said, stirring the soap into a lather, and noting the indecision in his face. "I am afraid of you!"

"Afraid of me?"

He stood for a moment in front of the little mir-

ror, turning his face from side to side. Mélisse handed him the razor and cup.

"You don't seem like the Jan that I used to know once upon a time. There has been a great change in you since—since—"

She hesitated.

"Since when, Mélisse?"

"Since the day we came in from the mountain and I put up my hair." With timid sweetness she added: "I haven't had it up again, Jan."

She caught a glimpse of his lathered face in the glass, staring at her with big, seeking eyes. He turned them quickly away when he saw that she was looking, and Mélisse set to work at the dishes. She had washed them before he finished shaving. Then she took down the old violin from the wall and began to play, her low, sweet voice accompanying the instrument in a Cree melody which Iowaka had taught her during Jan's absence at Nelson House and the Wholdaia.

Surprised, he faced her, his eyes glowing as there fell from her lips the gentle love-song of a heart-broken Indian maiden, filled with its infinite sadness

and despair. He knew the song. It was a lyric of the Crees. He had heard it before, but never as it came to him now, sobbing its grief in the low notes of the violin, speaking to him with immeasurable pathos from the trembling throat of Mélisse.

He stood silent until she had finished, staring down upon her bowed head. When she lifted her eyes to him, he saw that her long lashes were wet and glistening in the lamp-glow.

"It is wonderful, Mélisse! You have made beautiful music for it."

"Thank you, Jan."

She played again, her voice humming with exquisite sweetness the wordless music which he had taught her. At last she gave him the violin.

"Now you must play for me."

"I have forgotten a great deal, Mélisse."

She was astonished to see how clumsily his brown fingers traveled over the strings. As she watched him, her heart thrilled uneasily. It was not the old Jan who was playing for her now, but a new Jan, whose eyes shone dull and passionless, in whom there was no stir of the old spirit of the violin. He

wandered listlessly from one thing to another, and after a few minutes gave her the instrument again.

Without speaking, she rose from her chair and hung the violin upon the wall.

"You must practise a great deal," she said quietly.

At her movement he, too, rose from his seat; and when she turned to him again he had his cap in his hand. A flash of surprise shot into her eyes.

"Are you going so soon, Jan?"

"I am tired," he said in excuse. "It has been two days since I have slept, Mélisse. Good night!"

He smiled at her from the door, but the "Good night" which fell from her lips was lifeless and unmeaning. Jan shivered when he went out. Under the cold stars he clenched his hands, knowing that he had come from the cabin none too soon.

Choking back the grief of this last meeting with Mélisse, he crossed to the company store.

It was late when Cummins returned home. Mélisse was still up. He looked at her sharply over his shoulder as he hung up his coat and hat.

"Has anything come between you and Jan?" he asked suddenly. "Why have you been crying?"

"Sometimes the tears come when I am playing the violin, father. I know of nothing that has come between Jan and me, only I—I don't understand—"

She stopped, struggling hard to keep back the sobs that were trembling in her throat.

"Neither do I understand," exclaimed the factor, going to the stove to light his pipe. "He gave me his resignation as a paid servant of the company to-night!"

"He is not going—to leave—the post?" breathed Mélisse.

"He is leaving the service," reiterated her father. "That means he can not long live at Lac Bain. He says he is going into the woods, perhaps into Jean's country of the Athabasca. Has he told you more?"

"Nothing," said Mélisse.

She was upon her knees in front of the little bookcase. A blinding film burned in her eyes. She caught her breath, struggling hard to master herself before she faced her father again. For a moment the factor went into his room, and she took this opportunity of slipping into her own, calling "Good night" to him from the partly closed door.

The next day it was Croisset who went along the edge of the Barrens for meat. Gravois found Jan filling a new shoulder-pack with supplies. It was their first encounter since he had learned that Jan had given up the service.

"Diable!" he fairly hissed, standing over him as he packed his flour and salt in a rubber bag. *"Diable,* I say, M. Jan Thoreau!"

Jan looked up, smiling, to see the little Frenchman fairly quivering with rage.

"Bon jour, M. Jean de Gravois!" he laughed back. "You see I am going out among the foxes."

"The devils!" snapped Jean.

"No, the foxes, my dear Jean. I am tired of the post. I can make better wage for my time in the swamps to the west. Think of it, Jean! It has been many years since you have trapped there, and the foxes must be eating up the country!"

Jean's thin lips were almost snarling.

"Blessed saints, and it was I who—"

He spun upon his heels without another word, and went straight to Mélisse.

"Jan Thoreau is going to leave the post," he an-

nounced fiercely, throwing out his chest and glaring at her accusingly.

"So father has told me," said Mélisse.

Her cheeks were colorless, and there were purplish lines under her eyes, but she spoke with exceeding calmness.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Jean, whirling again, "you take it coolly!"

A little later Mélisse saw Jan coming from the store. When he entered the cabin his dark face betrayed the strain under which he was laboring, but his voice was unnaturally calm.

"I have come to say good-by, Mélisse," he said. "I am going to prospect for a good trap-line among the Barrens."

"I hope you will have good luck, Jan."

In her voice, too, was a firmness almost metallic.

For the first time in his life Jan held out his hand to her. She started, and for an instant the blood surged from her heart to her face. Then she gave him her own and looked him squarely and unflinchingly in the eyes.

"Will you wait a moment?" she asked.

She hurried into her room, and scarcely had she gone before she reappeared again, this time with a flush burning in her cheeks and her eyes shining brightly. She had unbraided her hair, and it lay coiled upon the crown of her head, glistening with crimson sprigs of bakneesh. She came to him a second time, and once more gave him her hand.

"I don't suppose you care now," she said coldly, and yet laughing in his face. "I have not broken my promise. It was silly, wasn't it?"

He felt as if his blood had been suddenly chilled to water, and he fought to choke back the thick throbbing in his throat.

"You promised—" He could not go further.

"I promised that I would not do up my hair again until you had forgotten to love me," she finished for him. "I will do it up now."

He bowed his head, and she could see his shoulders quiver under their thick caribou coat. Her tense lips parted, and she raised her arms as if on the point of stretching them out to him; but his voice came evenly, without a quiver, yet filled with the dispassionate truth of what he spoke.

"I have not forgotten to love you, Mélisse. I shall never cease to love my little sister. But you are older now, and it is time for you to do up your hair."

He turned, without looking at her again, leaving her standing with her arms still half stretched out to him, and went from the cabin.

"Good-by, Jan!"

The words fell in a sobbing whisper from her, but he had gone too far to hear. Through the window she saw him shake hands with Cummins in front of the company's store. She watched him as he went to the cabin of Iowaka and Jean. Then she saw him shoulder his pack, and, with bowed head, disappear slowly into the depths of the black spruce forest.

CHAPTER XXIII

JAN RETURNS

ALL that spring and summer Jan spent in the thick caribou swamps and low ridge-mountains along the Barrens. It was two months before he appeared at the post again, and then he remained only long enough to patch himself up and secure fresh supplies.

Mélisse had suffered quietly during these two months, a grief and loneliness filling her heart which none knew but herself. Even from Iowaka she kept her unhappiness a secret; and yet when the gloom had settled heaviest upon her, she was still buoyed up by a persistent hope. Until Jan's last visit to Lac Bain this hope never quite went out.

The first evening after his arrival from the swamps to the west, he came to the cabin. His beard had grown again. His hair was long and shaggy, and fell in shining dishevelment upon his shoulders. The sensitive beauty of his great eyes, once respon-

sive to every passing humor in Mélisse, flashing fun at her laughter, glowing softly in their devotion, was gone. His face was filled with the age-old silence of the forest man. Firmly and yet gently, it repelled whatever of the old things she might have said and done, holding her away from him as if by power of a strong hand.

This time Mélisse knew that there was left not even the last comforting spark of hope within her bosom. Jan had gone out of her life for ever, leaving to her, as a haunting ghost of what they two had once been to each other, the old violin on the cabin wall.

After he went away again, the violin became more and more to her what it had once been to him. She played it as he had played it, sobbing her loneliness and her heart-break through its strings, in lone hours clasping it to her breast and speaking to it as Jan had talked to it in years gone by.

"If you could only tell me—if you only could!" she whispered to it one day, when the autumn was drawing near. "If you could tell me about him, and what I might do—dear old violin!"

Once during the autumn Jan came in for supplies and traps, and his dogs and sledge. He was planning to spend the winter two hundred miles to the west, in the country of the Athabasca. He was at Lac Bain for a week, and during this time a mail runner came in from Fort Churchill.

The runner brought a new experience into the life of Mélisse—her first letter. It was from young Dixon—twenty or more closely written pages of it, in which he informed her that he was going to spend a part of the approaching winter at Lac Bain.

She was reading the last page when Jan came into the cabin. Her cheeks were slightly flushed by this new excitement, which was reflected in her eyes as she looked at Jan.

"A letter!" she cried, holding out her two hands filled with the pages. "A letter—to me, Jan, all the way from Fort Churchill!"

"Who in the world—" he began, smiling at her; and stopped.

"It's from Mr. Dixon," she said, the flush deepening in her cheeks. "He's going to spend part of the winter with us."

"I'm glad of that, Mélisse," said Jan quietly. "I like him, and would like to know him better. I hope he will bring you some more books—and strings." He glanced at the old violin. "Do you play much?"

"A great deal," she replied. "Won't you play for me, Jan?"

"My hands are too rough; and besides, I've forgotten all that I ever knew."

"Even the things you played when I was a baby?"

"I think I have, Mélisse. But you must never forget them."

"I shall remember them—always," she answered softly. "Some day it may be that I will teach them to you again."

He did not see her again until six months later, when he came in to the caribou roast, with his furs. Then he learned that another letter had come to Mélisse, and that Dixon had gone to London instead of coming to Lac Bain.

The day after the carnival he went back into the country of the Athabasca. Spring did not see him at Lac Bain. Early summer brought no news of him. In the floods, Jean went by the water-way to the

Athabasca, and found Thoreau's cabin abandoned. There had not been life in it for a long time. The Indians said that since the melting snows they had not seen Jan. A half-breed whom Jean met at Fond du Lac said that he had found the bones of a white man on the Beaver, with a Hudson's Bay gun and a horn-handled knife beside them.

Jean came back to Lac Bain heavy at heart.

"There is no doubt but that he is dead," he told Iowaka. "I do not believe that it will hurt very much if you tell Mélisse."

One day early in September a lone figure came in to the post at noon, when the company people were at dinner. He carried a pack, and six dogs trailed at his heels. It was Jan Thoreau.

"I have been down to civilization," was his explanation. "I have returned to spend this winter at Lac Bain."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RESCUE

ON the first snow came young Dixon from Fort Churchill. Jean de Gravois met him on the trail near Ledoq's. When the Englishman recognized the little Frenchman he leaped from his sledge and advanced with outstretched hand, his face lighting up with pleasure.

"Bless me, if it isn't my old friend, Jean!" he cried. "I was just thinking of you, Gravois, and how you trimmed me to a finish two winters ago. I've learned a lot about you people up here in the snows since then, and I'll never do anything like that again." He laughed into Jean's face as they shook hands, and his voice was filled with unbounded sincerity. "How is Mrs. Gravois, and the little Gravois—and Mélisse?" he added, before Jean had spoken.

"All well, M'seur Dixon," replied Jean. "Only

the little Gravois have almost grown into a man and woman."

An hour or so later he said to Iowaka:

"I can't help liking this man Dixon, and yet I don't want to. Why is it, do you suppose?"

"Is it because you are afraid that Mélisse will like him?" asked his wife, smiling over her shoulder.

"Blessed saints, I believe that it is!" said Jean frankly. "I hate foreigners—and Mélisse belongs to Jan."

"She did, once, but that was a long time ago, Jean."

"It may be, and yet I doubt it, *ma bien aimée*. If Jan would tell her—"

"A woman will not wait always," interrupted Iowaka softly. "Jan Thoreau has waited too long!"

A week later, as they stood together in front of their door, they saw Dixon and Mélisse walking slowly in the edge of the forest. The woman laughed into Jean's face.

"Did I not say that Jan had waited too long?"

Jean's face was black with disapprobation.

"Then you would have taken up with some for-

eigner if I had remained in the Athabasca country another year or two?" he demanded questioningly.

"Very likely," retorted Iowaka mischievously, running into the cabin.

"The devil!" said Jean sourly, stalking in the direction of the store.

He was angered at the coolness with which Jan accepted the situation.

"This Dixon is with Mélisse afternoon and evening, and they walk together every day in the bush," he said to him. "Soon there will be a wedding at Lac Bain!"

"Mélisse deserves a good man," replied Jan, unmoved. "I like Dixon."

Deep down in his soul he knew that each day was bringing the end of it all much nearer for him. He did not tell Mélisse that he had returned to Lac Bain to be near her once more, nor did he confide in Jean. He had anticipated that this winter at the post would be filled with a certain painful pleasure for him—but he had not anticipated Dixon. Day after day he saw Mélisse and the Englishman together, and while they awakened in him none of the

fiery jealousy which might have rankled in the bosom of Jean de Gravois, the knowledge that the girl was at last passing from him for ever added a deeper grief to that which was already eating at his heart.

Dixon made no effort to conceal his feelings. He loved Mélisse. Frankly he told this to Jean one day, when they were on the Churchill trail. In his honest way he said things which broke down the last of Jean's hereditary prejudices, and compelled him to admit that this was a different sort of foreigner than he had ever known before.

"*Diable,* I like him," he said to himself; "and yet I would rather see him in the blessed hereafter than have him take Mélisse from Jan!"

The big snow decided.

It came early in December. Dixon had set out alone for Ledoq's early in the morning. By noon the sky was a leaden black, and a little later one could not see a dozen paces ahead of him for the snow. The Englishman did not return that day. The next day he was still gone, and Gravois drove along the top of the mountain ridge until he came

to the Frenchman's, where he found that Dixon had started for Lac Bain the preceding afternoon. He brought word back to the post. Then he went to Mélisse.

"It is as good as death to go out in search of him," he said. "We can no longer use the dogs. Snowshoes will sink like leaden bullets by morning, and to go ten miles from the post means that there will be bones to be picked by the foxes when the crust comes!"

It was dark when Jan came into the cabin. Mélisse started to her feet with a little cry when he entered, covered white with the snow. A light pack was strapped to his back, and he carried his rifle in his hand.

"I am going to hunt for him," he said softly. "If he is alive, I will bring him back to you."

She came to him slowly, and the beating of Jan's heart sounded to him like the distant thrumming of partridge-wings. Ah, would he ever forget that look? The old glory was in her eyes, her arms were reaching out, her lips parted. Jan knew how the Great Spirit had once appeared to Mukee, and how

a white mist, like a snow-veil, had come between the half-breed's eyes and the wondrous Thing he beheld. That same veil drifted between Jan and the girl. As in a vision, he saw her face so near to him that he felt the touch of her sweet breath, and he knew that one of his rough hands was clasped in both of her own, and that after a moment it was crushed tightly against her bosom.

"Jan, my hero—"

He struggled back, almost sobbing, as he plunged out into the night again. He heard her voice crying after him, but the wild wailing of the spruce, and the storm in his brain, drowned its words. He had seen the glorious light of love in her eyes—her love for Dixon! And he would find him! At last he, Jan Thoreau, would prove that the old love was not dead within him; he would do for Mélisse this night —to-morrow—the next day, and until he fell down to die—what he had promised to do on their sledge-ride to Ledoq's. And then—

He went to Ledoq's now, following the top of the mountain, and reached his cabin in the late dawn. The Frenchman stared at him in amazement when

he learned that he was about to set out on a search for Dixon.

"You will not find him," he said slowly in French; "but if you are determined to go, I will hunt with you. It is a big chance that we will not come back."

"I don't want you to go," objected Jan. "One will do as much as two, unless we search alone. I came your way to find if it had begun to snow before Dixon left."

"An hour after he had gone, you could not see your hand before your face," replied Ledoq, preparing his pack. "There is no doubt but that he circled out over Lac Bain. We will go that far together, and then search alone."

They went back over the mountain, and stopped when instinct told them that they were opposite the spruce forests of the lake. There they separated, Jan going as nearly as he could guess into the northwest, Ledoq trailing slowly and hopelessly into the south.

It was no great sacrifice for Jan, this struggle with the big snows for the happiness of Mélisse. What it was to Ledoq no man ever guessed or knew, for it was not until the late spring snows had gone

that the people at Lac Bain found what the foxes and the wolves had left of him, far to the south.

Fearlessly Jan plunged into the white world of the lake. There was neither rock nor tree to guide him, for everywhere was the heavy ghost-raiment of the Indian god. The balsams were bending under it, the spruces were breaking into hunchback forms, the whole world was twisted in noiseless torture under its increasing weight. Out through the still terror of it all Jan's voice went in wild, echoing shouts. Now and then he fired his rifle, and always he listened long and intently. The echoes came back to him, laughing, taunting, and then each time fell the mirthless silence of the storm.

Day came, only a little lighter than the night. He crossed the lake, his snow-shoes sinking ankle-deep at every step, and once each half-hour he fired a single shot from his rifle. He heard shots to the south, and knew that it was Ledoq; each report coming to him more faintly than the last, until they had died away entirely.

Across the lake he struck the forest again, and his shouts echoed in futile inquiry in its weird depths.

About him there was no sign of life, no sound except the faint fluttering of falling snow. Under five feet of this snow the four-footed creatures of the wilderness were snugly buried; close against the trunks of the spruces, sheltered within their tent-like coverings, the birds waited like lifeless things for the breaking of the storm.

At noon Jan stopped and ate his lunch. Then he went on, carrying his rifle always upon his right shoulder, so that the steps of his right leg would be shortened, and he would travel in a circle, as he believed Dixon had done.

The storm thickened with the falling of night, and he burrowed himself a great hole in the soft snow and filled it with balsam boughs for a bed. When he awakened, hours later, he stood up, and thrust out his head, and found himself buried to the arm-pits. With the aid of his broad snow-shoes he drew himself out, until he stood knee-deep in the surface.

He lifted his pack. As he swung it before him, one arm thrust through a strap, he gave a startled cry. Half of one side of the pack was eaten away!

He thrust his hands through the breach, and a moan of despair sobbed on his lips when he found that his food was gone. A thin trickle of flour ran through his fingers upon the snow. He pulled out a gnawed pound of bacon, a little tea—and that was all.

Frantically he ripped the rent wider in his search, and when he stood up, his wild face staring into the chaos about him, he held only the bit of bacon in his hand. In it were the imprints of tiny teeth—sharp little razor-edged teeth that told him what had happened. While he had slept a mink had robbed him of his food!

With one of his shoes he began digging furiously in the snow. He tore his balsam bed to pieces. Somewhere—somewhere not very far away—the little animal must have cached its theft. He dug down until he came to the frozen earth. For an hour he worked and found nothing.

Then he stopped. Over a small fire he melted snow for tea and broiled a slice of the bacon, which he ate with the few biscuit crumbs he found in the pack. Every particle of flour that he could find he

scraped up with his knife and put into one of the deep pockets of his caribou coat. After that he set cut in the direction in which he thought he would find Lac Bain.

Still he shouted for Dixon, and fired an occasional shot from his rifle. By noon he should have struck the lake. Noon came and passed; the gloom of a second night fell upon him. He built himself a fire, and ate two-thirds of what remained of the bacon. The handful of flour in his pocket he did not disturb.

It was still night when he broke his rest and struggled on. His first fears were gone. In place of them, there filled him now a grim sort of pleasure. A second time he was battling with death for Mélisse. And this, after all, was not a very hard fight for him. He had feared death in the red plague, but he did not fear the thought of this death that threatened him in the big snows. It thrilled him, instead, with a strange sort of exhilaration. If he died, it would be for Mélisse, and for all time she would remember him for what he had done.

When he ate the last bit of his bacon, he made up

his mind what he would do when the end came. In the stock of his rifle he would scratch a few last words to Mélisse. He even arranged the words in his brain—four of them—"Mélisse, I love you." He repeated them to himself as he staggered on, and that night, beside the fire he built, he began by carving her name.

"To-morrow," he said softly, "I will do the rest."

He was growing very hungry, but he did not touch the flour. For six hours he slept, and then drank his fill of hot tea.

"We will travel until day, Jan Thoreau," he informed himself, "and then, if nothing turns up, we will build our last camp, and eat the flour. It will be the last of us, for there will be no meat above this snow for days."

His snow-shoes were an impediment now, and he left them behind, along with one of his two blankets, which had grown to be like lead upon his shoulders. He counted his cartridges—ten of them. One of these he fired into the air.

Was that an echo he heard?

A sudden thrill shot through him. He strained

his ears to catch a repetition of the sound. In a moment it came again—clearly no echo this time.

"Ledoq!" he cried aloud.

He fired again.

Back to him came the distant, splitting crack of a rifle. He forced his way toward it. After a little he heard the signal again, much nearer than before, and he fired in response. A few hundred yards farther on he came to a low mountain ridge, and lifted his voice in a loud shout. A shot came from just over the mountain.

Waist deep in the light snow he began the ascent, dragging himself up by the tops of the slender saplings, stopping every few yards to half-stretch himself out in the soft mass through which he was struggling, panting with exhaustion. He shouted when he gained the top of the ridge. Up through the white blur of snow on the other side there came to him faintly a shout; yet, in spite of its faintness, Jan knew that it was very near.

"Something has happened to Ledoq," he told himself, "but he surely has food, and we can live it out until the storm is over."

It was easier going down the ridge, and he went quickly in the direction from which the voice had come, until a mass of huge boulders loomed up before him. There was a faint odor of smoke in the air, and he followed it in among the rocks, where it grew stronger.

"Ho, Ledoq!" he shouted.

A voice replied a dozen yards away. Slowly, as he advanced, he made out the dim shadow of life in the white gloom—a bit of smoke climbing weakly in the storm, the black opening of a brush shelter—and then, between the opening and the spiral of smoke, a living thing that came creeping toward him on all fours, like an animal.

He plunged toward it, and the shadow staggered upward, and would have fallen had it not been for the support of the deep snow. Another step, and a sharp cry fell from Jan's lips. It was not Ledoq, but Dixon, who stood there with white, starved face and staring eyes in the snow gloom!

"My God, I am starving—and dying for a drink of water!" gasped the Englishman chokingly, thrusting out his arms. "Thoreau, God be praised—"

He staggered, and fell in the snow. Jan dragged him back to the shelter.

"I will have water for you—and something to eat —very soon," he said.

His voice sounded unreal. There was a mistiness before his eyes which was not caused by the storm, a twisting of strange shadows that bothered his vision, and made him sway dizzily when he threw off his pack to stir the fire. He suspended his two small pails over the embers, which he coaxed into a blaze. Both he filled with snow; into one he emptied the handful of flour that he had carried in his pocket —into the other he put tea. Fifteen minutes later he carried them to the Englishman.

Dixon sat up, a glazed passion filling his eyes. He drank the hot tea greedily, and as greedily ate the boiled flour-pudding. Jan watched him hungrily until the last crumb of it was gone. He refilled the pails with snow, added more tea, and then rejoined the Englishman. New life was already shining in Dixon's eyes.

"Not a moment too soon, Thoreau," he said thankfully, reaching over to grip the other's hand.

"Another night and—" Suddenly he stopped. "Great Heaven, what is the matter?"

He noticed for the first time the pinched torture in his companion's face. Jan's head dropped weakly upon his breast. His hands were icy cold.

"Nothing," he murmured drowsily, "only—I'm starving, too, Dixon!" He recovered himself with an effort, and smiled into Dixon's startled face. "There is nothing to eat," he continued, as he saw the other direct his gaze toward the pack. "I gave you the last of the flour. There is nothing—but salt and tea." He rolled over upon the balsam boughs with a restful sigh. "Let me sleep!"

Dixon went to the pack. One by one, in his search for food, he took out the few articles that it contained. After that he drank more tea, crawled back into the balsam shelter, and lay down beside Jan. It was broad day when he awoke, and he called hoarsely to his companion when he saw that the snow had ceased falling.

Jan did not stir. For a moment Dixon leaned over to listen to his breathing, and then dragged himself slowly and painfully out into the day. The

fire was out. A leaden blackness still filled the sky; deep, silent gloom hung in the wake of the storm.

Suddenly there came to Dixon's ears a sound. It was a sound that would have been unheard in the gentle whispering of a wind, in the swaying of the spruce-tops; but in this silence it fell upon the starving man's hearing with a distinctness that drew his muscles rigid and set his eyes staring about him in wild search. Just beyond the hanging pails a moose-bird hopped out upon the snow. It chirped hungrily, its big, owl-like eyes scrutinizing Dixon. The man stared back, fearing to move. Slowly he forced his right foot through the snow to the rear of his left, and as cautiously brought his left behind his right, working himself backward step by step until he reached the shelter. Just inside was his rifle. He drew it out and sank upon his knees in the snow to aim. At the report of the rifle, Jan stirred but did not open his eyes; he made no movement when Dixon called out in shrill joy that he had killed meat. He heard, he strove to arouse himself, but something more powerful than his own will seemed pulling him down into oblivion. It seemed

an eternity before he was conscious of a voice again. He felt himself lifted, and opened his eyes with his head resting against the Englishman's shoulder.

"Drink this, Thoreau," he heard.

He drank, and knew that it was not tea that ran down his throat.

"Whisky-jack soup," he heard again. "How is it?"

He became wide-awake. Dixon was offering him a dozen small bits of meat on a tin plate, and he ate without questioning. Suddenly, when there were only two or three of the smallest scraps left, he stopped.

"*Mon Dieu,* it was whisky-jack!" he cried. "I have eaten it all!"

The young Englishman's white face grinned at him.

"I've got the flour inside of me, Thoreau—you've got the moose-bird. Isn't that fair?"

The plate dropped between them. Over it their hands met in a great, clutching grip, and up from Jan's heart there welled words which almost burst from his lips in voice, words which rang in his brain,

and which were an unspoken prayer—"Mélisse, I thank the great God that it is this man whom you love!" But it was in silence that he staggered to his feet and went out into the gloom.

"This may be only a lull in the storm," he said. "We must lose no time. How long did you travel before you made this camp?"

"About ten hours," said Dixon. "I made due west by compass until I knew that I had passed Lac Bain, and then struck north."

"Ah, you have the compass," cried Jan, his eyes lighting up. "M'seur Dixon, we are very near to the post if you camped so soon! Tell me which is north."

"That is north."

"Then we go south—south and east. If you traveled ten hours, first west and then north, we are northwest of Lac Bain."

Jan spoke no more, but got his rifle from the shelter and put only the tea and two pails in his pack; leaving the remaining blanket upon the snow. The Englishman followed close behind him, bending weakly under the weight of his gun. Tediously they

struggled to the top of the ridge, and as Jan stopped to look through the gray day about him, Dixon sank down into the snow. When the other turned toward him he grinned up feebly into his face.

"Bushed," he gasped. "Don't believe I can make it through this snow, Thoreau."

There was no fear in his eyes; there was even a cheerful ring in his voice.

A sudden glow leaped into Jan's face.

"I know this ridge," he exclaimed. "It runs within a mile of Lac Bain. You'd better leave your rifle behind."

Dixon made an effort to rise and Jan helped him. They went on slowly, resting every few hundred yards, and each time that he rose from these periods of rest, Dixon's face was twisted with pain.

"It's the flour and water anchored amidships," he smiled grimly. "Cramps—Ugh!"

"We'll make it by supper-time," assured Jan cheerfully.

Dixon leaned heavily on his arm.

"I wish you'd go on alone," he urged. "You could send help—"

"I promised Mélisse that I would bring you back if I found you," replied Jan, his face turned away. "If the storm broke again, you would be lost."

"Tell me—tell me—" he heard Dixon pant eagerly, "did she send you to hunt for me, Thoreau?"

Something in the Englishman's voice drew his eyes to him. There was an excited flush in his starved cheeks; his eyes shone.

"Did she send you?"

Jan struggled hard to speak calmly.

"Not in words, M'seur Dixon. But I know that if I get you safely back to Lac Bain she will be very happy."

Something came in Dixon's sobbing breath which Jan did not hear. A little later he stopped and built a fire over which he melted more snow and boiled tea. The drink stimulated them, and they went on. A little later still and Jan hung his rifle in the crotch of a sapling.

"We will return for the guns in a day or so," he said.

Dixon leaned upon him more heavily now, and

the distances they traveled between resting periods became shorter and shorter. Three times they stopped to build fires and cook tea. It was night when they descended from the ridge to the snow-covered ice of Lac Bain. It was past midnight when Jan dragged Dixon from the spruce forest into the opening at the post. There were no lights burning, and he went with his half-conscious burden to the company's store. He awakened Croisset, who let them in.

"Take care of Dixon," said Jan, "and don't arouse any of the people to-night. It will be time enough to tell what has happened in the morning."

Over the stove in his own room he cooked meat and coffee, and for a long time sat silent before the fire. He had brought back Dixon. In the morning Mélisse would know. First she would go to the Englishman, then—then—she would come to him!

He rose and went to the rude board table in the corner of his room.

"No, Mélisse must not come to me in the morning," he whispered to himself. "She must never again look upon Jan Thoreau."

He took pencil and paper and wrote. Page after page he crumpled in his hand and flung into the fire. At last, swiftly and despairingly, he ended with half a dozen lines. What he said came from his heart, in French:

"I have brought him back to you, my Mélisse, and pray that the good God may give you happiness. I leave you the old violin, and always when you play, it will tell you of the love of Jan Thoreau."

He folded the page and sealed it in one of the company's envelopes. Very quietly he went from his room down into the deserted store. Without striking a light he found a new pack, a few articles of food, and ammunition. The envelope, addressed to Mélisse, he left where Croisset or the factor would find it in the morning. His dogs were housed in a shack behind the store, and he called out their names softly and warningly as he went among them. As stealthily as their master they trailed behind him to the edge of the forest, and close under the old spruce that guarded the grave Jan stopped, and silently he stretched out his arms to the little cabin.

The dogs watched him. Kazan, the one-eyed leader, glared from him into the dimness of the night, whining softly. A low, mourning wind swept through the spruce tops, and from Jan's throat there burst sobbingly words which he had heard beside this same grave more than seventeen years before, when Williams' choking voice had risen in a last prayer for the woman.

"May the great God care for Mélisse!"

He turned into the trail upon which Jean de Gravois had fought the Englishman, led his dogs and sledge in a twisting path through the caribou swamp, and stood at last beside the lob-stick tree that leaned out over the edge of the white barrens. With his knife he dug out the papers which he had concealed in that whisky-jack hole.

It was near dawn when he recovered the rifle which he had abandoned on the mountain top. A little later it began to snow. He was glad, for it would conceal his trail.

For thirteen days he forced his dogs through the deep snows into the south. On the fourteenth they came to Le Pas, which is the edge of civilization.

It was night when he came out of the forest, so that he could see the faint glow of lights beyond the Saskatchewan.

For a few moments, before crossing, he stopped his tired dogs and turned his face back into the grim desolation of the North, where the aurora was playing feebly in the skies, and beckoning to him, and telling him that the old life of centuries and centuries ago would wait for him always at the dome of the earth.

"The good God bless you, and keep you, and care for you ever more, my Mélisse," he whispered; and he walked slowly ahead of his dogs, across the river, and into the Other World.

CHAPTER XXV

JACK THORNTON

THERE was music that night in Le Pas. Jan heard it before he came to the first of the scattered lights, and the dogs pricked up their ears. Kazan, the one-eyed, whined under his breath, and the weight at Jan's heart grew heavier as the dog turned up his head to him in the starlight. It was strange music, nothing like Jan had ever heard. It was strange to Kazan, and set him whining, and he thrust his muzzle up to his master's touch inquiringly. They passed on like shadows, close to a big, lighted log building from which the music came, and with it a tumult of laughter, of shuffling and stamping feet, of coarse singing and loud voices. A door opened and a man and a woman came out. The man was cursing, and the woman was laughing at him—laughing as Jan had never heard a woman laugh before, and he held his breath as he listened to the

taunting mockery in it. Others followed the first man and the first woman. Some passed quietly. A woman, escorted between two men, screamed with merriment as she flung toward his shadowy figure an object which fell with a crash against the sledge. It was a bottle. Kazan snarled. The trace-dogs slunk close to the leader's heels. With a low word Jan led them on.

Close down to the river, where the Saskatchewan swung in a half-moon to the south and west, he found a low, squat building with a light hung over the door illuminating a bit of humor in the form of a printed legend which said that it was "King Edward's Hotel." The scrub bush of the forest grew within a hundred yards of it, and in this bush Jan tied his dogs and left his sledge. It did not occur to him that now, when he had entered civilization, he had come also into the land of lock and bolt, of robbers and thieves. It was loneliness, and not suspicion, that sent him back to unleash Kazan and take him with him.

They entered the hotel, Kazan with suspicious caution. The door opened into a big room lighted

by an oil lamp, turned low. The room was empty except for a solitary figure sitting in a chair, facing a wide window which looked into the north. Making no sound, that he might not disturb this other occupant, Jan also seated himself before the window. Kazan laid his wolfish head across his master's knees, his one eye upon him steadily and questioningly. Never in all his years of life had Jan felt the depth of loneliness that swept upon him now, as he looked into the North. Below him the Saskatchewan lay white and silent; beyond it he could see the dark edge of the forest, and far, far, beyond that, hovering low in the sky, the polar star. It burned faintly now, almost like a thousand other stars that he saw, and the aurora was only a fading glow.

Something rose up in Jan's throat and choked him, and he closed his eyes, with his fingers clutching Kazan's head. In spite of the battle that he had fought, his mind swept back—back through the endless silent spaces, over mountains and through forests, swift, resistless, until once more the polar star flashed in all its glory over his head, and he was at Lac Bain. He did not know that he was surrender-

ing to hunger, exhaustion, the cumulative effects of his thirteen days' fight in the forests. He was with Mélisse again, with the old violin, with the things that they had loved. He forgot in these moments that there was another in the room; he heard no sound as the man shifted his position so that he looked steadily at him and Kazan. It was the low, heart-broken sob of grief that fell from his own lips that awakened him again to a consciousness of the present.

He jerked himself erect, and found Kazan with his fangs gleaming. The stranger had risen. He was standing close to him, leaning down, staring at him in the dim lamplight, and as Jan lifted his own eyes he knew that in the pale, eager face of the man above him there was written a grief which might have been a reflection of his own. For a full breath or two they looked, neither speaking, and the hair along Kazan's spine stood stiff. Something reached out to Jan and set his tired blood tingling. He knew that this man was not a forest man. He was not of his people. His face bore the stamp of the people to the south, of civilization. And yet

something passed between them, leaped all barriers, and made them friends before they had spoken. The stranger reached down his hand, and Jan reached up his. All of the loneliness, the clinging to hope, the starving desire of two men for companionship, passed in the long grip of their hands.

"You have just come down," said the man, half questioningly. "That was your sledge—out there?"

"Yes," said Jan.

The stranger sat down in the chair next to Jan.

"From the camps?" he questioned eagerly.

"What camps, m'sieur?"

"The railroad camps, where they are putting the new line through, beyond Wekusko."

"I know of no camps," said Jan simply. "I know of no railroad, except this that comes to Le Pas. I come from Lac Bain, on the edge of the barren lands."

"You have never been down before?" asked the stranger softly. Jan wondered at the light in his eyes.

"A long time ago," he said, "for a day. I have passed all of my life—up there." Jan pointed to the

north, and the other's eyes turned to where the polar star was fading low in the sky.

"And I have passed all of my life *down there,*" he replied, nodding his head to the south. "A year ago I came up here for—for health and happiness," he laughed nervously. "I found them both. But I'm leaving them. I'm going back to-morrow. My name is Thornton," he added, holding out his hand again. "I come from Chicago."

"My name is Thoreau—Jan Thoreau," said Jan. "I have read of Chicago in a book, and have seen pictures of it. Is it larger than the city that is called Winnipeg?"

He looked at Thornton, and Thornton turned his head a little so that the light did not shine in his face. The grip of his fingers tightened about Jan's hand.

"Yes, it is larger."

"The officers of the great company are at Winnipeg, and *Le Commissionaire,* are they not, m'sieur?"

"Of the Hudson's Bay Company—yes."

"And if there was business to do—important business, m'sieur, would it not be best to go to *Le Commissionaire?*" questioned Jan.

Thornton looked hard at the tense eagerness in Jan's face.

"There are nearer headquarters, at Prince Albert," he said.

"That is not far," exclaimed Jan, rising. "And they would do business there—important business?" He dropped his hand to Kazan's head, and half turned toward the door.

"Perhaps better than the Commissioner," replied Thornton. "It might depend—on what your business is."

To them, as each stood for a moment in silence, there came the low wailing of a dog out in the night.

"They are calling for Kazan," said Jan quietly, as though he had not read the question in Thornton's last words. "Good night, m'sieur!"

The dogs were sitting upon their haunches, waiting, when Jan and Kazan went back to them. Jan drew them farther back, where the thick spruce shut them out from the clearing, and built a fire. Over this he hung his coffee-pail and a big chunk of frozen caribou meat, and tossed frozen fish to the

hungry dogs. Then he pulled down spruce boughs and spread his heavy blankets out near the fire, and waited for the coffee and meat to cook. The huskies were through when he began eating, and they lay on their bellies, close about his feet, ready to snap at the scraps which he threw them. Jan noticed, as he ate, that there was left in them none of the old, fierce, fighting spirit. They did not snap or snarl. There was no quarreling when he threw bits of meat to them, and he found himself wondering if they, too, were filled with the sickness which was eating at his own heart.

With this sickness, this deathly feeling of loneliness and heartache, there had entered into Jan now a strange sensation that was almost excitement—an eagerness to fasten the dogs in their traces, to hurry on, in spite of his exhaustion, to that place which Thornton had told him of—Prince Albert, and to free himself there, for all time, of the thing which had oppressed him since that night many years ago, when he had staggered into Lac Bain to play his violin as Cummins' wife died. He reached inside his skin coat and there he felt papers which he had taken

from the hole in the lob-stick tree. They were safe. For twenty years he had guarded them. To-morrow he would take them to the great company at Prince Albert. And after that—after he had done this thing, what would there remain in life for Jan Thoreau? Perhaps the company might take him, and he would remain in civilization. That would be best—for him. He would fight against the call of his forests as years and years ago he had fought against that call of the Other World that had filled him with unrest for a time. He had killed *that*. If he *did* return to his forests, he would go far to the west, or far to the east. No one that had ever known him would hear again of Jan Thoreau.

Kazan had crept to his blanket, daring to encroach upon it inch by inch, until his great wolf-head lay upon Jan's arm. It was ten years ago that Jan had taken Kazan, a little half-blind puppy that he and Mélisse had chosen from a litter of half a dozen stronger brothers and sisters. Kazan was all that was left to him now. He loved the other dogs, but they were not like Kazan. He tightened his arm about the dog's head. Exhaustion, and the warmth

of the fire, made him drowsy, and, after a time, he slept, with his head thrown back against the tree.

Something awoke him, hours afterward. He opened his eyes, and found that the fire was still burning brightly. On the far side of it, beyond the dogs, sat Thornton. A look at the sky, where the stars were dying, and Jan knew that it was just before the gray break of dawn. He sat upright. Thornton laughed softly at him, and puffed out clouds of smoke from his pipe.

"You were freezing," he said, as Jan stared, "and sleeping like a dead man. I waited for you back there, and then hunted you up. You know—I thought—" He hesitated, and knocked the ash from his pipe bowl. Then he looked frankly and squarely at Jan. "See here, old man, if you're hard up—had trouble of any sort—bad luck—got no money—won't you let me help you out?"

"Thank you, m'sieur—I have money," said Jan. "I prefer to sleep outside with the dogs. *Mon Dieu,* I guess I would have been stiff with the frost if you had not come. You have been here—all night?"

Thornton nodded.

"And it is morning," exclaimed Jan, rising and looking above the spruce tops. "You are kind, m'sieur. I wish I might do as much for you."

"You can," said Thornton quietly. "Where are you going—from here?"

"To the company's offices at Prince Albert. We will start within an hour."

"Will you take me with you?" Thornton asked.

"With pleasure!" cried Jan. "But it will be a hard journey, m'sieur. I must hurry, and you may not be accustomed to running behind the dogs."

Thornton rose and stretched out a hand.

"It can't be too hard for me," he said. "I wish—"

He stopped, and something in his low voice made Jan look straight into his eyes. For a moment they gazed at each other in silence, and again Jan saw in Thornton's face the look of loneliness and grief which he had first seen in the half gloom of the hotel. It was the suppressed note in Thornton's voice, of despair almost, that struck him deepest, and made him hold the other's hand a moment longer. Then he turned to his pack upon the sledge.

"I've got meat and coffee and hard biscuits," he said. "Will you have breakfast with me?"

That day Jan and Thornton made fifty miles westward over the level surface of the Saskeram, and camped again on the Saskatchewan. The second day they followed the river, passed the Sipanock, and struck south and west over the snow-covered ice for Prince Albert. It was early afternoon of the fourth day when at last they came to the town.

"We will go to the offices of the great company," said Jan. "We will lose no time."

It was Thornton now who guided him to the century-old building at the west edge of the town. It was Thornton who led him into an office filled mostly with young women, who were laboring at clicking machines; and it was Thornton who presented a square bit of white card to a gray-haired man at a desk, who, after reading it, rose from his chair, bowed, and shook hands with him. And a few moments later a door opened, and Jan Thoreau, alone, passed through it, his heart quivering,

his breath choking him, his hand clutching at the papers in his breast pocket.

Outside Thornton waited. An hour passed and still the door did not reopen. The man at the desk glanced curiously at Thornton. Two girls at typewriters exchanged whispered opinions as to who might be this wild-looking creature from the north who was taking up an hour of the sub-commissioner's time. Nearly two hours passed before Jan appeared. Thornton, still patient, rose as the door opened. His eyes first encountered the staring face of the sub-commissioner. Then Jan came out. He had aged five years in two hours. There was a tired stoop to his shoulders, a strange pallor in his cheeks. To Thornton his thin face seemed to have grown thinner. With bowed head, looking nowhere but ahead of him, Jan passed on, and as the last door opened to let them out into the pale winter sun, Thornton heard the muffled sobbing of his breath. His fingers gripped Jan's arm, his eyes were blazing.

"If you're getting the wrong end of anything up there," he cried fiercely; "if you're in trouble, and they're taking the blood out of you—tell me and I'll

put the clamps on 'em, so 'elp me God! They'll buck the devil when they buck Jack Thornton, and if it needs money to show 'em so, I've got half a million to teach 'em the game!"

"Thanks, m'sieur," struggled Jan, striving to keep a lump out of his throat. "It's nothing like that. I don't need money. Half a million would just about buy—what I've given away up there."

He clutched his hand for an instant to the empty pocket where the papers had been.

CHAPTER XXVI

TEMPTATION

THAT night, leaving Thornton still at supper in the little old Windsor Hotel, Jan slipped away, and with Kazan at his heels, crossed the frozen Saskatchewan to the spruce forest on the north shore. He wanted to be alone, to think, to fight with himself against a desire which was almost overpowering him. Once, long ago, he had laid his soul bare to Jean de Gravois, and Jean had given him comfort. To-night he longed to go to Thornton, as he had gone to Jean, and to tell him the same story, and what had passed that day in the office of the sub-commissioner. In his heart there had grown something for Thornton that was stronger than friendship—something that would have made him fight for him, and die for him, as he would have fought and died for Jean de Gravois. It was a feeling cemented by a belief that something was troubling Thornton—that he,

too, was filled with a loneliness and a grief which he was trying to conceal. And yet he fought to restrain himself from confiding in his new friend. It would do no good, he knew, except by relieving him of a part of his mental burden. He walked along the shore of the river and recrossed it again near the company's offices. All were dark with the exception of the sub-commissioner's room. In that there glowed a light. The sub-commissioner was keeping his promise. He was working. He worked until late, for Jan came back two hours after and saw the light still there.

A week—it might be ten days, the sub-commissioner had told him, and it would be over. Always something in the north drew Jan's eyes, and he looked there now, wondering what would happen to him after that week was over.

Lights were out and people were in bed when he and Kazan returned to the hotel. But Thornton was up, sitting by himself in the gloom, as Jan had first seen him at Le Pas. Jan sat down beside him. There was an uneasy tremor in Thornton's voice when he said:

"Jan, did you ever love a woman—love her until you were ready and willing to die for her?"

The suddenness of the question wrung the truth from Jan's lips in a low, choking voice. For an instant he thought that Thornton must have guessed his secret.

"Yes, m'sieur."

Thornton leaned toward him, gripping his knees, and the misery in his face was deeper than Jan had ever seen it before.

"I love a woman—like that," he went on tensely. "A girl—not a woman, and she is one of your people, Jan—of the north, as innocent as a flower, more beautiful *to me* than—than all the women I have ever seen before. She is at Oxford House. I am going home to—to save myself."

"Save yourself!" cried Jan. "*Mon Dieu,* m'sieur—does she not love you?"

"She would follow me to the end of the earth!"

"Then—"

Thornton straightened himself and wiped his pale face. Suddenly he rose to his feet and motioned for Jan to follow him. He walked swiftly out into

the night, and still faster after that, until they passed beyond the town. From where he stopped they could look over the forests far into the pale light of the south.

"*That's* hell for me!" said Thornton, pointing. "It's what we call civilization—but it's mostly hell, and it's all hell for me. It's a hell of big cities, of strife, of blood-letting, of wickedness. I never knew how great a hell it was until I came up here—among *you*. I wish to God I could stay—always!"

"You love her," breathed Jan. "You can stay."

"I can't," groaned Thornton. "I can't—unless—"

"What, m'sieur?"

"Unless I lose everything—but her."

Jan's fingers trembled as they sought Thornton's hand.

"And everything is—is—nothing when you give it for love and happiness," he urged. "The great God, I know—"

"Everything," cried Thornton. "Don't you understand? I said *everything!*" He turned almost fiercely upon his companion. "I'd give up my name —for *her*. I'd bury myself back there in the forests

and never go out of them—for *her*. I'd give up fortune, friends, lose myself for ever—for *her*. But I can't. Good God, don't you understand?"

Jan stared. His eyes grew large and dark.

"I've spent ten years of *worse* than hell down there—with a woman," went on Thornton. "It happens among us—frequently, this sort of hell. I came up here to get out of it for a time. You know—now. There is a woman down there who —who is my wife. She would be glad if I never returned. She is happy now, when I am away, and I have been happy—for a time. I know what love is. I have felt it. I have lived it. God forgive me, but I am almost tempted to go back—to *her!*"

He stopped at the change which had come in Jan, who stood as straight and as still as the blank spruce behind them, with only his eyes showing that there was life in him. Those eyes held Thornton's. They burned upon him through the gray gloom as he had never seen human eyes burn before. He waited, half startled, and Jan spoke. In his voice there was nothing of that which Thornton saw in his eyes. It was low, and soft, and though it had that which

rung like steel, Thornton could not have understood or feared it more.

"M'sieur, how far have you gone—*with her?*"

Thornton understood and advanced with his hands reaching out to Jan.

"Only as far as one might go with the purest thing on earth," he said. "I have sinned—in loving her, and in letting her love me, but that is all, Jan Thoreau. I swear that is all!"

"And you are going back into the south?"

"Yes, I am going back into the south."

The next day Thornton did not go. He made no sign of going on the second day. So it was with the third, the fourth, and the fifth. On each of these days Jan went once, in the afternoon, to the office of the sub-commissioner, and Thornton always accompanied him. At times, when Jan was not looking, there was a hungry light in his eyes as he followed the other's movements, and once or twice Jan caught what was left of this look when he turned unexpectedly. He knew what was in Thornton's mind, and he pitied him, grieved with him in his own heart until his own secret almost wrung itself from his

lips. Somehow, in a way that he could not understand, Thornton's sacrifice to honor, and his despair, gave Jan strength, and a hundred times he asked himself if a confession of his own misery would do as much for the other. He repeated this thought to himself again and again on the afternoon of the ninth day, when he went to the sub-commissioner's office alone. This time Thornton had remained behind. He had left him in a gloomy corner of the hotel room from which he had not looked up when Jan went out with Kazan.

This ninth day was the last day for Jan Thoreau. In a dazed sort of way he listened as the sub-commissioner told him that the work was ended. They shook hands. It was dark when Jan came out from the company's offices, dark with a pale gloom through which the stars were beginning to glow—with a ghostly gloom, lightened still more in the north with the rising fires of the northern lights. Alone Jan stood for a few moments close down to the river. Across from him was the forest, silent, black, reaching to the end of the earth, and over it, like a signal light, beckoning him back to his world,

the aurora sent out its shafts of red and gold. And as he listened there came to him faintly a distant wailing sound that he knew was the voice from that world, and at the sound the hair rose along Kazan's spine, and he whined deep down in his throat. Jan's breath grew quicker, his blood warmer. Over there —across the river—his world was calling to him, and he, Jan Thoreau, was now free to go. This very night he would bury himself in the forest again, and when he lay down to sleep it would be with his beloved stars above him, and the winds whispering sympathy and brotherhood to him in the spruce tops. He would go—*now*. He would say good-by to Thornton—and *go*.

He found himself running, and Kazan ran beside him. He was breathless when he came to the one lighted street of the town. He hurried to the hotel and found Thornton sitting where he had left him.

"It is ended, m'sieur," he cried in a low voice. "It is over, and I am going. I am going to-night."

Thornton rose. "To-night," he repeated.

"Yes, to-night—now. I am going to pick up my things. Will you come?"

He went ahead of Thornton to the bare little room in which he had slept while at the hotel. He did not notice the change in Thornton until he had lighted a lamp. Thornton was looking at him doggedly. There was an unpleasant look in his face, a flush about his eyes, a rigid tenseness in the muscles of his jaws.

"And I—I, too, am going to-night," he said.

"Into the South, m'sieur?"

"No, into the *North.*" There was a fierceness in Thornton's emphasis. He stood opposite Jan, leaning over the table on which the light was placed. "I've broken loose," he went on. "I'm not going south—back to that hell of mine. I'm never going south again. I'm dead down there—dead for all time. They'll never hear of me again. They can have my fortune—everything. I'm going North. I'm going to live with *you* people—and *God—and her!*"

Jan sank into a chair, Thornton sat down in one across from him.

"I am going back to her," he repeated. "No one will ever know."

He could not account for the look in Jan's eyes

nor for the nervous twitching of the lithe brown hands that reached half across the table. But Kazan's one eye told him more than Thornton could guess, and in response to it that ominous shivering wave rose along his spine. Thornton would never know that Jan's fingers twitched for an instant in their old mad desire to leap at a human throat.

"You will not do that," he said quietly.

"Yes, I will," replied Thornton. "I have made up my mind. Nothing can stop me but—death."

"There is one other thing that can stop you, and will, m'sieur," said Jan as quietly as before. "I, Jan Thoreau, will stop you."

Thornton rose slowly, staring down into Jan's face. The flush about his eyes grew deeper.

"I will stop you," repeated Jan, rising also. "And I am not death."

He went to Thornton and placed his two hands upon his shoulders, and in his eyes there glowed now that gentle light which had made Thornton love him as he had loved no other man on earth.

"M'sieur, I will stop you," he said again, speaking as though to a brother. "Sit down. I am going to

tell you something. And when I have told you this you will take my hand, and you will say, 'Jan Thoreau, I thank the Great God that something like this has happened before, and that it has come to my ears in time to save the one I love.' Sit down, m'sieur."

CHAPTER XXVII

JAN'S STORY

JAN had aged five years during those two hours in the office of the sub-commissioner; he aged now as Thornton looked at him. There came the same tired, hopeless glow into his eyes, the same tense lines in his face. And yet, quickly, he changed as he had not changed on that afternoon. Two livid spots began to burn in his cheeks as he sat down opposite Thornton. He turned the light low, and his eyes glowed more darkly and with an animal-like luster in the half gloom. Something in him now, a quivering, struggling passion that lay behind those eyes, held Thornton white and silent.

"M'sieur," he began in the low voice which Thornton was beginning to understand, "I am going to tell you something which I have told to but two other human beings. It is the story of another man—a man from civilization, like you, who came

up into this country of ours years and years ago, and who met a woman, as you have met this girl at Oxford House, and who loved her as you love this one, and perhaps more. It is singular that the case should be so similar, m'sieur, and it is because of this that I believe Our Blessed Lady gives me courage to tell it to you. For this man, like you, left a wife—and two children—when he came into the North. M'sieur, I pray the Great God to forgive him, for he left a third child—unborn."

Jan leaned upon his hand so that it shaded his face.

"It is not so much of *that* as of what followed that I am going to tell you, m'sieur," he went on. "It was a beautiful love—on the woman's part, and it would have been a beautiful love on the man's part if it had been pure. For her he gave up everything, even his God—as you would give up everything—and your God—for this girl at Oxford House. M'sieur, I will speak mostly of the woman now. She was beautiful. She was one of the three most beautiful things that God ever placed in our world, and she loved this man. She married him, believed in him, was ready to die for him, to follow

him to the ends of the earth, as our women will do for the men they love. God in Heaven, can you not guess what happened, m'sieur? *A child was born!"*

So fiercely did Jan cry out the words that Thornton jerked back as though a blow had been struck at him from out of the gloom.

"A child was born!" repeated Jan, and Thornton heard his nails digging in the table. "That was the first curse of God—a child! *La Charogne—les bêtes de charogne*—that is what we call them—beasts of carrion and carrion eaters, breeders of devils and sin! *Mon Dieu,* that is what happened! A child was born, with the curse of God upon him!"

Jan stopped, his nails digging deeper, his breath escaping from him as though he had been running.

"Down in *your* world he would have grown up a *man,"* he continued, speaking more calmly. "I have heard that—since. It is common down there to be a two-legged carrion—a man or a woman born out of wedlock. I have been told so, and that it is a curse not without hope. But here it is different. The curse never dies. It follows, day after day, year after year. And this child—more unfortunate than the

wild things, was born one of them. Do you understand, m'sieur? If the winds had whispered the secret nothing would have come near him—the Indian women would sooner have touched the plague—he would have been an outcast, despised as he grew older, pointed at and taunted, called names which are worse than those called to the lowest and meanest dogs. *That* is what it means to be born under that curse—up here."

He waited for Thornton to speak, but the other sat silent and moveless across the table.

"The curse worked swiftly, m'sieur. It came first—in remorse—to the man. It gnawed at his soul, ate him alive, and drove him from place to place with the woman and the child. The purity and love of the woman added to his suffering, and at last he came to know that the hand of God had fallen upon his head. The woman saw his grief but did not know the reason for it. And so the curse first came to her. They went north—far north, above the Barren Lands, and the curse followed there. It gnawed at his life until—he died. That was seven years after the child was born."

The oil lamp sputtered and began to smoke, and with a quick movement Jan turned the wick down until they were left in darkness.

"M'sieur, it was then that the curse began to fall upon the woman and the child. Do you not believe that about the sins of the fathers falling upon others? *Mon Dieu,* it is so—it is so. It came in many small ways—and then—the curse—it came suddenly—*like this.*" Jan's voice came in a hissing whisper now. Thornton could feel his hot breath as he leaned over the table, and in the darkness Jan's eyes shone like two coals of fire. "It came like *this!*" panted Jan. "There was a new missioner at the post—a—a Christian from the South, and he was a great friend to the woman, and preached God, and she *believed* him. The boy was very young, and saw things, but did not understand at first. He knew, afterward, that the missioner loved his mother's beauty, and that he tried hard to win it—and failed, for the woman, until death, would love only the one to whom she had given herself first. Great God, it happened *then*—one night when every soul was about the big fires at the caribou roast, and there was no one near the

lonely little cabin where the boy and his mother lived. The boy was at the feast, but he ran home—with a bit of dripping meat as a gift for his mother—and he heard her cries, and ran in to be struck down by the missioner. It happened *then,* and even the boy knew, and followed the man, shrieking that he had killed his mother." There was a terrible calmness now in Jan's voice. "M'sieur, it was true. She wasted away like a flower after that night. She died, and left the boy alone with the curse. And that boy, m'sieur, was Jan Thoreau. The woman was his mother."

There was silence now, a dead, pulseless quiet, broken after a moment by a movement. It was Thornton, groping across the table. Jan felt his hands touch his arm. They groped farther in the darkness, until Jan Thoreau's hands were clasped tightly in Thornton's.

"And that—is all?" he questioned hoarsely.

"No, it is but the beginning," said Jan softly. "The curse has followed me, m'sieur, until I am the unhappiest man in the world. To-day I have done all that is to be done. When my father died he left

papers which my mother was to give to me when I had attained manhood. When she died they came to me. She knew nothing of that which was in them, and I am glad. For they told the story that I have told to you, m'sieur, and from his grave my father prayed to me to make what restitution I could. When he came into the North for good he brought with him most of his fortune—which was large, m'sieur—and placed it where no one would ever find it—in the stock of the Great Company. A half of it, he said, should be mine. The other half he asked me to return to his children, and to his real wife, if she were living. I have done more than that, m'sieur. I have given up all—for none of it is mine. A half will go to the two children whom he deserted. The other half will go to the child that was unborn. The mother—is—dead."

After a time Thornton said,

"There is more, Jan."

"Yes, there is more, m'sieur," said Jan. "So much more that if I were to tell it to you it would not be hard for you to understand why Jan Thoreau is the unhappiest man in the world. I have told you that

this is but the beginning. I have not told you of how the curse has followed me and robbed me of all that is greatest in life—how it has haunted me day and night, m'sieur, like a black spirit, destroying my hopes, turning me at last into an outcast, without people, without friends, without—that—which you, too, will give up in this girl at Oxford House. M'sieur, am I right? You will not go back to her. You will go south, and some day the Great God will reward you."

He heard Thornton rising in the dark.

"Shall I strike a light, m'sieur?"

"No," said Thornton close to him. In the gloom their hands met. There was a change in the other's voice now, something of pride, of triumph, of a glory just achieved. "Jan," he said softly, "I thank you for bringing me face to face with a God like yours. I have never met Him before. We send missionaries up to save you, we look upon you as wild and savage and with only half a soul—and we are blind. You have taught me more than has ever been preached into me, and this great, glorious world of yours is sending me back a better man for having

come into it. I am going—south. Some day I will return, and I will be one of this world, and one of your people. I will come, and I will bring no curse. If I could send this word to *her,* ask her forgiveness, tell her what I have almost been and that I still have hope—faith—I could go easier down into that other world."

"You can," said Jan. "I will take this word for you, m'sieur, and I will take more, for I will tell her what it has been the kind fate for Jan Thoreau to find in the heart of M'sieur Thornton. She is one of my people, and she will forgive, and love you more for what you have done. For this, m'sieur, is what the Cree god has given to his people as the honor of the great snows. She will still love you, and if there is to be hope it will burn in *her* breast, too. M'sieur—"

Something like a sob broke through Thornton's lips as he moved back through the darkness.

"And you—I will find you again?"

"They will know where I go from Oxford House. I will leave word—with *her,*" said Jan.

"Good-by," said Thornton huskily.

Jan listened until his footsteps had died away, and for a long time after that he sat with his head buried in his arms upon the little table. And Kazan, whining softly, seemed to know that in the darkened room had come to pass the thing which broke at last his master's overburdened heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MUSIC AGAIN

THAT night Jan Thoreau passed for the last time back into the shelter of his forests; and all that night he traveled, and with each mile that he left behind him something larger and bolder grew in his breast until he cracked his whip in the old way, and shouted to the dogs in the old way, and the blood in him sang to the wild spirit of the wilderness. Once more he was home. To him the forest had always been home, filled with the low voice of whispering winds and trees, and to-night it was more his home than ever. Lonely and sick at heart, with no other desire than to bury himself deeper and deeper into it, he felt the life, and sympathy, and love of it creeping into his heart, grieving with him in his grief, warming him with its hope, pledging him again the eternal friendship of its trees, its mountains, and all of the wild that it held therein.

And from above him the stars looked down like a billion tiny fires kindled by loving hands to light his way—the stars that had given him music, peace, since he could remember, and that had taught him more of the silent power of God than the lips of man could ever tell. From this time forth Jan Thoreau knew that these things would be his life, his god. A thousand times in fanciful play he had given life and form to the star-shadows about him, to the shadows of the tall spruce, the twisted shrub, the rocks and even the mountains. And now it was no longer play. With each hour that passed this night, and with each day and night that followed, they became more real to him, and his fires in the black gloom painted him pictures as they had never painted them before, and the trees and the rocks and the twisted shrub comforted him more and more in his loneliness, and gave to him the presence of life in their movement, in the coming and going of their shadow-forms. Everywhere they were the same old friends, unvarying and changeless. The spruce-shadow of to-night, nodding to him in its silent way, was the same that had nodded to him last night—

a hundred nights ago; the stars were the same, the winds whispering to him in the tree-tops were the same, everything was as it was yesterday—years ago—unchanged, never leaving him, never growing cold in their devotion. He had loved the forest—*now* he worshipped it. In its vast silence he still possessed Mélisse. It whispered to him still of her old love, of their days and years of happiness, and with his forest he lived these days over and over again, and when he slept with his forest he dreamed of them.

Nearly a month passed before he reached Oxford House and found the sweet-faced girl whom Thornton loved. He did as Thornton had asked, and went on—into the north and east. He had no mission now, except to roam in his forests. He went down the Hayes, getting his few supplies at Indian camps, and stopped at last, with the beginning of spring, far up on the Cutaway. Here he built himself a camp and lived for a time, setting dead-falls for bear. Then he struck north again, and still east—keeping always away from Lac Bain. When the first chill winds of the bay brought warning of winter down to him he was filled for a time with a longing to strike north—

and *west,* to go once more back to his Barren Lands. But, instead, he went south, and so it came to pass that a year after he had left Lac Bain he built himself a cabin deep in the forest of God's River, fifty miles from Oxford House, and trapped once more for the company. He had not forgotten his promise to Thornton, and at Oxford House left word where he could be found if the man from civilization should return.

In late mid-winter Jan returned to Oxford House with his furs. It was on the night of the day that he came into the post that he heard a Frenchman who had come down from the north speak of Lac Bain. None noticed the change in Jan's face as he hung back in the shadows of the company's store. A little later he followed the Frenchman outside, and stopped him where there were no others near to overhear.

"M'sieur, you spoke of Lac Bain," he said in French. "You have been there?"

"Yes," replied the other, "I was there for a week waiting for the first sledge snow."

"It is my old home," said Jan, trying to keep his

voice natural. "I have wondered—if there are changes. You saw—Cummins—the factor?"

"Yes, he was there."

"And—and Jean de Gravois, the chief man?"

"He was away. *Mon Dieu,* listen to that! The dogs are fighting out there!"

"A moment, m'sieur," begged Jan, as the Frenchman made a movement as if to run in the direction of the tumult. "The factor had a daughter—Mélisse—"

"She left Lac Bain a long time ago, m'sieur," interrupted the trapper, making a tremendous effort to be polite as he edged toward the sound of battle. "M'sieur Cummins told me that he had not seen her in a long time—I believe it was almost a year. *Sacré,* listen to that! They are tearing one another to bits, and they are *my* dogs, m'sieur, for I can tell their voices among a thousand!"

He sprang through the darkness and Jan made a movement to follow. Then he stopped, and turned instead to the company's store. He took his pack to the sledge and dogs in the edge of the spruce, and Kazan leaped to greet him at the end of his babiche.

This night as Jan traveled through the forest he did not notice the stars or the friendly shadows.

"A year," he repeated to himself, again and again, and once, when Kazan rubbed against his leg and looked up into his face, he said, "Ah, Kazan, our Mélisse went away with the Englishman. May the Great God give them happiness!"

The forest claimed him more than ever after this. He did not go back to Oxford House in the spring but sold his furs to a passing half-breed, and wandered through all of that spring and summer in the country to the west. It was January when he returned to his cabin, when the snows were deepest, and three days later he set out to outfit at the Hudson's Bay post on God's Lake instead of at Oxford House. It was while they were crossing a part of the lake that Kazan leaped aside for an instant in his traces and snapped at something in the snow.

Jan saw the movement but gave no attention to it until a little later, when Kazan stopped and fell upon his belly, biting at the harness and whining in pain. The thought of Kazan's sudden snap at the

snow came to him then like a knife-thrust, and with a low cry of horror and fear he fell upon his knees beside the dog. Kazan whimpered and his bushy tail swept the snow as Jan lifted his great wolfish head between his two hands. No other sound came from Jan's lips now, and slowly he drew the dog up to him until he held him in his arms as he might have held a child. Kazan stilled the whimpering sounds in his throat. His one eye rested on his master's face, faithful, watching for some sign—for some language there, even as the burning fires of a strange torture gnawed at his life, and in that eye Jan saw the deepening reddish film which he had seen a hundred times before in the eyes of foxes and wolves killed by poison bait.

A moan of anguish burst from Jan's lips and he held his face close down against Kazan's head, and sobbed now like a child, while Kazan rubbed his hot muzzle against his cheek and his muscles hardened in a last desire to give battle to whatever was giving his master grief. It was a long time before Jan lifted his face from the shaggy head, and when he did he knew that the last of all love, of all com-

panionship, of all that bound him to flesh and blood in his lonely world, was gone. Kazan was dead.

From the sledge he took a blanket and wrapped Kazan in it, and carried him a hundred yards back from the trail. With bowed head he came behind his four dogs into God's House. Half an hour later he turned back into the wilderness with his supplies. It was dark when he returned to where he had left Kazan. He placed him upon the sledge and the four huskies whined as they dragged on their burden, from which the smell of death came to them. They stopped in the deep forests beyond the lake and Jan built a fire.

This night, as on all nights in his lonely life, Jan drew Kazan close to him, and he shivered as the other dogs slunk back from him suspiciously and the fire and the spruce tops broke the stillness of the forest. He looked at the crackling flames, at the fitful shadows which they set dancing and grimacing about him, and it seemed to him now that they were no longer friends, but were taunting him—gloating in Kazan's death, and telling him that he was alone, alone, alone. He let the fire die down, stirring it

into life only when the cold stiffened him, and when at last he fell into an unquiet slumber it was still to hear the spruce tops whispering to him that Kazan was dead, and that in dying he had broken the last fragile link between Jan Thoreau and Mélisse.

He went on at dawn, with Kazan wrapped in his blanket on the sledge. He planned to reach the cabin that night, and the next day he would bury his old comrade. It was dark when he came to the narrow plain that lay between him and the river. The sky was brilliant with stars when he slowly climbed the big, barren ridge at the foot of which was his home. At the summit he stopped and seated himself on the edge of a rock, with nothing but a thousand miles of space between him and the pale glow of the northern lights. At his feet lay the forest, black and silent, and he looked down to where he knew his cabin was waiting for him, black and silent, too.

For the first time it came upon him that *this* was home—that the forest, and the silence, and the little cabin hidden under the spruce tops below held a deeper meaning for him than a few hours before, when Kazan was a leaping, living comrade at his

side. Kazan was dead. Down there he would bury him. And he had loved Kazan;—he knew, now, as he clutched his hands to his aching breast, that he would have fought for Kazan—given up his life for him—as he would have done for a brother. Down there, under the silent spruce, he would bury the last that had remained to him of the old life, and there swelled up in his heart a longing, almost a prayer, that Mélisse might know that he, Jan Thoreau, would have nothing left to him to-morrow but a grave, and that in that grave was their old chum, their old playmate—Kazan. Hot tears blinded Jan's eyes and he covered his face with his hands, and sobbed as he had sobbed years before, when in the southern wilderness word came to him that Mélisse was dying.

"Mélisse—Mélisse—" He moaned her name aloud, and stared through the hot film in his eyes away into the north, sobbing to her, calling to her in his grief, and looking through that thousand miles of starlit space as though from out of it her sweet face would come to him once more. And as he called there seemed to come to him from out of

that space a sound, so sweet, and low, and tender that his heart stood still and he stood up straight and stretched his arms up to Heaven, for Jan Thoreau knew that it was the sound of a violin that came to him from out of the north—that Mélisse, an infinity away, had heard his call, his prayer, and was playing for him and Kazan!

And suddenly, as he listened, his arms fell to his sides, and there shot into his eyes all of the concentrated light of the stars, for the music came nearer and nearer, and still nearer to him, until he caught Kazan in his arms and ran with him down the side of the mountain. It died now in the forest—then rose again, softer and more distant it seemed to him, luring him on into the forest gloom. For a few moments consciousness of all else but that sound remained with him only in a dazed, half real way, and as John Cummins had called upon the angels at Lac Bain may years ago when he, too, had gone out into the night to meet this wonderful music, so Jan Thoreau's soul cried to them now as he clutched Kazan to him, and stumbled on. Then, suddenly, he came upon the cabin, and in the cabin there was a light!

Gently he laid Kazan down upon the snow, and for a full minute he stood and listened, and heard, lower and sweeter still, the gentle music of the violin. Some one was in his cabin—living hands were playing! After all it was not the spirit of Mélisse that had come to him in the hour of his deepest grief, and a sob rose in his throat. He went on, step by step, and at the door he stopped again, wondering if he was mad, if the spirits of the forest were taunting him still, if—if—

One step more—

The Great God, he heard it now—the low, sweet music of the old Cree love song, played in the old, old way, with all of its old sadness, its whispering joy, its weeping song of life, of death, of love! With a great cry he flung open the door and leaped in, with his arms reaching out, his eyes blinded for a moment by the sudden light—and with a cry as piercing as his own, something ran through that light to meet him—Mélisse, the old, glorious Mélisse, crushing her arms about his neck, sobbing his name, pleading with him in her old, sweet voice to kiss her, kiss her, kiss her—while Jan Thoreau for the

first time in his life felt sweeping over him a resistless weakness, and in this vision he knew that Jean de Gravois came to him, too, and held him in his arms, and that as the light faded away from about him he still heard Mélisse calling to him, felt her arms about him, her face crushed to his own. And as the deep gloom enveloped him more densely, and he felt himself slipping down through it, he whispered to the faces which he could no longer see,

"Kazan—died—to-night—"

For a long time Jan fought to throw off the darkness, and when he succeeded, and opened his eyes again, he knew that it was Mélisse who was sitting beside him, and that it was Mélisse who flung her arms about him when he awoke from his strange sleep, and held his wild head pressed against her bosom—Mélisse, with her glorious hair flowing about her as he had loved it in their old days, and with the old love shining in her eyes, only more glorious now, as he heard her voice.

"Jan—Jan—we have been hunting for you—so long," she cried softly. "We have been searching—ever since you left Lac Bain. Jan, dear Jan, I loved

you so—and you almost broke my heart. Dear, dear Jan," she sobbed, stroking his face now, "I know why you ran away— I know, and I love you so that —that I will die if—you go away again."

"You know!" breathed Jan. He was in his cot, and raised himself, clasping her beautiful face between his two hands, staring at her with the old horror in his eyes. "You know—and you come—to me!"

"I love you," said Mélisse. She slipped up to him and laid her face upon his breast, and with her fingers clutched in his long hair she leaned over to him and kissed him. "I love you!"

Jan's arms closed about her, and he bowed his face so that it was smothered in her hair and he felt against it the joyous tremble of her bosom.

"I love you," she whispered again, and under her cloud of hair their lips met, and she whispered again, with her sweet breath still upon his lips, "I love you."

Outside Jean de Gravois was dancing up and down in the starlit edge of the forest, and Iowaka was looking at him.

"And *now* what do you think of your Jean de

Gravois?" cried Jean for the hundredth time at least. "*Now* what do you think of him, my beautiful one?" and he caught Iowaka's head in his arms, for the hundredth time, too, and kissed her until she pushed him away. "Was it not right for me to break my oath to the Blessed Virgin and tell Mélisse why Jan Thoreau had gone mad? Was it not right, I say? And did not Mélisse do as I told that fool of a Jan that she *would* do? And didn't she *hate* the Englishman all of the time? Eh? Can you not speak, my raven-haired angel?"

He hugged Iowaka again in his arms, and this time he did not let her go, but turned her face so that the starlight fell upon it.

"And *now* what if Jan Thoreau still feels that the curse is upon him?" he asked softly. "Ho, ho, we have fixed that—you, my sweet Iowaka, and your husband, Jean de Gravois. I have it—here—in my pocket—the letter signed by the sub-commissioner at Prince Albert, to whom I told Jan's story when I followed his trail down there—the letter which says that the other woman died *before* the man who was to be Jan Thoreau's father married the woman

who was to be his mother. And *now* do you understand why I did not tell Mélisse of this letter, *ma chérie?* It was to prove to that fool of a Jan Thoreau that she loved him—*whatever he was. Now* what do you think of Jean de Gravois, you daughter of a princess, you—you—"

"Wife of the greatest man in the world," laughed Iowaka softly. "Come, my foolish Jean, we can not stand out for ever. I am growing cold. And besides, do you not suppose that Jan would like to see *me?*"

"Foolish—foolish—foolish—" murmured Jean as they walked hand in hand through the starlight. "She, my Iowaka, my beloved, says that I am foolish—*and after this! Mon Dieu,* what can a man do to make himself great in the eyes of his wife?"

THE END